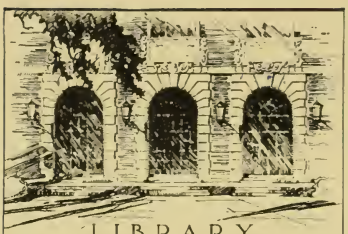

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THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE DAYS OF HOGARTH," "FAUST," "WAGNER, THE WEHR-WOLF," "THE PIXY," "ROBERT MACAIRE," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "THE SEAMSTRESS," "THE BRONZE STATUE," "POPE JOAN," "KENNETH," &c., &c. &c.

WITH FIFTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS.

DRAWN BY W. H. THWAITS, AND ENGRAVED BY E. HOOPER.

VOL. III.

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THE MYSTERIES

OF

THE COURT OF LONDON.

TWO INTRODUCTORY CHAPTERS.

FIRST INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

In the neighbourhood of the ancient city of Canterbury, there stood some years ago a beautiful little cottage in the midst of a garden surrounded by a high hedge. Through this verdant barrier glimpses might be caught of the parterres of flowers arranged with a neatness and cultivated with a care that denoted the supervision of feminine taste; and no stranger passing

that way during the season when Flora is wont to deck the earth with the loveliest and richest hues, could fail to pause, at least for a few moments, and contemplate that picturesque spot.

But oft-times the interest of the scene was enhanced by the presence of two charming female forms, moving along the gravel walks, and affording in the simplicity of their attire a striking contrast to the pomp and gaud of the tulips, the daffodils, the pinks, the roses, and the peonies, which margined their path.

The two beautiful creatures just alluded to were sisters—and they were likewise orphans. Their parents they had never known: but in that cottage they had been reared from their infancy by an affectionate aunt who fostered them with a maternal care. From this relative they had learnt that they were born in London: but their earliest reminiscences were associated only with their present picturesque though humble abode. Their father, they were informed, was an officer in the army who had been killed in the Flemish campaigns in 1795; and this incident, it appeared, had produced such a shock upon the mind of their mother, who was still in her confinement with the younger girl when the sad intelligence reached her, that she died of a broken heart. Thus was it that the care of the orphans had devolved upon their deceased father's sister, Miss Stanley—a maiden lady, with but a limited income. The cottage near Canterbury, where she dwelt, was however her own property; and as she was a woman of frugal habits, she had managed to ensure the advantages of a good education for her two nieces.

In the ages of the sisters there was a difference of about twenty months: but in their personal appearance there was a great discrepancy. Clara, the elder, was a splendid creature—remarkably precocious in the expanding richness of her form, and looking two or three years older than she really was: whereas Louisa, the younger, was of that nymph-like beauty and sylphid grace which invested her with an air of childish sweetness and charming simplicity. A similar contrast existed with regard to their minds, their tastes, and their pursuits, although they had been subjected to the same influences in respect to training and education: but it was nevertheless a fact that while Clara was fond of romances and love-tales, Louisa's favourite reading was the highest standard of poetry, and books calculated to improve and strengthen the understanding. Moreover, the elder sister was somewhat indolent in her habits, and disliked needle-work: whereas Louisa could not bear to be unoccupied, and was always busied with her books, her flowers, her music, or her needle. There was also a tinge of selfishness and egoism in Clara's disposition, which had peeped forth in her childhood and become decidedly perceptible in her girlhood, although the mode of life in which she was reared was too regular, simple, and unartificial to develop that sentiment completely. But, on the other hand, Louisa was all artless generosity and ingenuous good-nature—the purity of her thoughts reflecting in the amiability of her manners, and the innocence of her soul shining in her looks and penetrating all her actions.

In unruffled tranquillity had passed the existence of these lovely beings until Clara had attained the age of nineteen and Louisa was consequently a few months past that of seventeen. Then did a terrible calamity befall the orphans—a blow which struck all the more severely inasmuch as it came with such cruel abruptness. This was not the death—but perhaps the worse than death—of their aunt, who was suddenly stricken with a paralysis that deprived her of the faculty of speech and prostrated the powers of her reason. The ablest professional assistance that Canterbury could afford, was called in: but no mitigation of the misfortune resulted from the talent, skill, and attention bestowed upon the case;—and, though the aunt's life was pronounced beyond any immediate danger, she nevertheless lived as it were without the sense of existence—dumb as the inferior beings of the creation, and with the mind's lamp extinguished apparently for ever.

Some months elapsed—and so long as the money lasted which the sisters found in their unfortunate relative's writing-desk, they did not give themselves much thought as to pecuniary matters. Clara's indolence threw upon Louisa the principal charge of the household arrangements; and the younger sister's economy—a habit derived from her aunt's example—made the immediate resources endure as long as possible. But one morning, when Louisa gave the female-servant the last guinea to change, the young maiden was for the first time troubled as to the source of future supplies. She communicated the cause of her perplexity to Clara, who suggested the prudence of examining the aunt's private papers in order to ascertain whence her income was derived. This step was accordingly adopted: but nothing was found in the writing-desk at all calculated to assist the orphans out of their dilemma. Louisa however recollected that her aunt was in the habit of paying an occasional visit to a bank in Canterbury; and putting on her bonnet and scarf, she at once repaired to that establishment to make the inquiries which circumstances suggested. The banker received the young maiden with kindness, and informed her that Miss Stanley, the aunt, had been in the habit of drawing every half-year for sixty pounds upon a certain Mr. Beckford who resided in London, and who had invariably honoured the draughts: but who Mr. Beckford was, or what claim the aunt had upon him, the banker was totally unable to state. He however undertook to write to that gentleman and describe the calamity which had reduced Miss Stanley to a condition of worse than childish helplessness.

In a few days Louisa called at the bank again;

and to her joy she learnt that a letter had been received from London, containing favourable intelligence. In that response Mr. Beckford briefly expressed his sorrow at the aunt's misfortune, and undertook to honour thenceforth the joint draught of the two nieces for the same half-yearly sum as before.

Eighteen months now passed away without any incident worthy of record: but at the end of this period the usual draught drawn by the sisters upon Mr. Beckford was returned unpaid from the London banker through the Canterbury one. The words, "No instructions to cash this cheque," seemed to indicate some oversight on Mr. Beckford's part; and Louisa accordingly wrote to him. But her letter remained without an answer; and a second, third, and fourth epistle experienced the same unaccountable and alarming silence. The Canterbury banker considerately offered to get his London agent to call upon Mr. Beckford: but the London banker never took any notice of the application. In fine, several weeks passed without enabling the orphans to elicit any satisfactory intelligence concerning the matter; and were it not for Louisa's economies and savings, they would have been plunged into the most serious embarrassments. As it was, however, they saw the immediate necessity of adopting some measure to ascertain the cause of Mr. Beckford's silence; and, after a long deliberation, the young ladies could arrive at no other conclusion than that one of them must proceed to London.

The moment this step was determined upon, Clara sprang from the arm-chair in which she had been indolently half-reclining, and volunteered to undertake the journey; alleging that as she was the elder it was her duty to encounter any perils attendant thereon. She likewise observed that as Louisa was so well acquainted with the household duties and was moreover accustomed to minister to their poor afflicted aunt, it was in every respect advisable for her to remain at home. The younger sister offered no objection to this reasoning; and an inside place having been secured in the stage-coach for the following day, Clara made her little preparations for departure.

The young lady was not indolent now. A remarkable spirit of activity seemed suddenly to have inspired that form which looked so softly voluptuous and so sensuously lazy as it lolled in the arm-chair. To tell the truth, Clara experienced a secret and unknown joy at the thought of visiting London—that city of which she had heard her aunt speak at times, and of which she had read such exciting accounts in novels and love-tales. She was however ashamed of herself for giving way to this sensation of pleasure, undefined though it were;—and when she beheld her afflicted aunt, and then turned her eyes towards her fair young sister—when she saw that unfortunate relative gazing on vacancy with dull and meaningless look, and when she observed the crystal tears trickling down the damask surface of Louisa's cheeks,—Clara was stricken with remorse to think that she should even for a single moment have rejoiced at the prospect of leaving the home which contained all she had near or dear to her upon earth.

It was in the month of July, 1814, that Clara Stanley was thus called upon by circumstances to undertake a journey to London. She was now twenty-one years of age, and assuredly was as magnificent a creature as the sun ever shone upon. Louisa was a little more than nineteen; and her enchanting beauty was combined with so gentle and winning a grace that the most brutal ruffian in the universe could not have injured a hair of that lovely being's head. The appearance of the elder sister was calculated to ravish and enthral the senses—that of the younger to captivate the mind. Clara had a look that was amorous and languishing: but artless innocence sate enthroned on Louisa's brow and beamed in every glance that flashed from her eyes. The former was endowed with woman's softest and most seducing charms: the latter was the impersonation of candour and purity.

Such were the two beings who stood, on a July morning, at the door of the cottage to breathe a few last fond words in each other's ears and exchange the farewell kiss. The weather was superb: the earth was already flooded with the burnished glory that poured from the eastern horizon;—and the flowers were expanding to the god of day—some in the splendour of their pomp—others in the delicacy of their beauty. In the shade formed by the evergreens and larger plants, the dew-drops still hung impearled to the pink, the lily, and the rose—like tears upon beauty's cheek, where the tints expressing each transient emotion are so exquisite in their blendings. But where the sun-beams shone full upon emerald leaf and variegated flower, the morning's freshness had exhaled away; and the golden air was becoming heavy and faint with perfume.

Beneath the mingling honey-suckles and roses which covered the cottage portico and formed a natural canopy that far outvied the velvet gaud which spreads above the thrones of kings,—the sisters stood to say their last farewells. Louisa's grief was enhanced by a presentiment of evil for which she could not account, and which she could not shake off. It appeared to her as if she were embracing her sister for the last time,—as if they were separating, not for days only, but for months and years—perhaps for ever! Clara was astonished and distressed at the wildness of Louisa's sorrow, which partook of the nature of a rending anguish and deep despair: but when the young maiden, amidst passionate sobs and deluging tears, revealed the presentiment which thus tortured her, the elder sister shuddered as if she had just received the explanation of a misgiving which had likewise sprung up in her own mind.

But at length they parted: yes—they parted—Clara being compelled to tear herself away from Louisa's embrace;—and while the former hurried on to overtake the maid-servant who had proceeded in advance with her box, the younger sister sped to her own chamber where she fell upon her knees and besought heaven to shield the loved one who had just gone forth as it were upon the wide world for the first time!

The coach office in Canterbury was reached—the box containing Clara's necessaries was placed on the roof of the vehicle—and the young lady, having taken her place inside, bade the maid-servant good-bye. Away rolled the coach: the outskirts of Canterbury were soon gained—and Clara kept her tearful eyes fixed upon the colossal tower of the cathedral until it faded from her view. Then, as the last familiar object which marked her dwelling-place was thus lost in the distance, she felt as if an immeasurable gulf had suddenly yawned between herself and the home which she had just left—and her tears flowed freely. But her fellow-travellers, who happened to be kind-hearted and worthy people, proffered their consolations;—and one of them began to expatiate so enthusiastically upon the wonders, the bustle, and the gaiety of London, that Clara forgot her grief in the interest with which she listened to his remarks.

It was not until late in the evening that the coach entered London: and although the dim oil-lamps afforded but an imperfect view of the streets through which the vehicle passed in its progress towards Gracechurch Street, yet Clara was delighted, astonished, and bewildered by the endless maze of buildings which it thus threaded. At length, having crossed old London Bridge, the coach stopped at the Cross Keys inn, where the young lady, by the advice of her communicative fellow-traveller, resolved to pass the night.

Early in the morning she rose—dressed herself, with the utmost care, in her best apparel—and, having partaken of breakfast, procured a hackney-coach to convey her to the West End. The driver was instructed to proceed to Mr. Beckford's, No. 20, Hanover Square: and while threading all the various streets through which it was necessary to pass, Clara had an opportunity of judging how far the descriptions she had heard and read of London were based upon truth. In some respects she was disappointed—but in others she was more than satisfied;—and altogether she could not conceal from herself the fact that she was well pleased at having had an excuse to visit the metropolis. Now and then, as she was rolling along in the hackney-coach, her heart swelled and her bosom heaved as she thought of her afflicted aunt and her loving sister: but the next moment some brilliant equipage dashing by, or a handsome edifice, or a superb shop would attract her gaze—and thus was her mind diverted from unpleasant reflections.

The hackney-coach entered Hanover Square and stopped at the number which Clara had mentioned. The driver knocked at the door—and a powdered lacquey came forth. But to the young lady's mingled astonishment and dismay, the servant declared that no such person as Mr. Beckford was known at the house, which indeed was the mansion of Sir Archibald Malvern, a baronet. Clara was bewildered and knew not what to think. She was certain, beyond all possibility of mistake, that the draughts which herself and Louisa had jointly drawn for the last eighteen months, were addressed to Mr. Beckford, No. 20, Hanover Square; and yet he was unknown at the place! The lacquey, observing that she was perplexed, added to her confusion by volunteering the assurance that he knew the name of every family in the Square, and that there was no house in the occupancy of a Mr. Beckford. Clara inquired whether any letters addressed to Mr. Beckford had ever been received at No. 20: but to this query the man unhesitatingly returned a negative.

The young lady was utterly at a loss what course to pursue or what conjecture to form. But feeling the absolute necessity of sifting the matter to the very bottom, she begged the servant to obtain for her a few minutes' interview with Sir Archibald Malvern. To this request the man replied that his master was not at home—that he had been absent for some weeks—and that it appeared quite uncertain when he would return: then, after a pause, he added that Sir Archibald's son, Mr. Valentine Malvern, was within and would no doubt see the young lady. Clara at once accepted this proposition; and the lacquey introduced her into the house.

Scarcely had she waited a couple of minutes in the splendidly-furnished room to which she was shown, when a tall, slender, handsome young gentleman, about two-and-twenty years of age, made his appearance. A profound melancholy shaded his countenance; and when he spoke his voice, naturally full of masculine melody, was marked by the accents of a deep sorrow. Altogether, his appearance and his manners were calculated to inspire a sincere feeling of interest and excite emotions of true sympathy in his behalf.

This young gentleman was Valentine Malvern; and he had already heard from the domestic the nature of the inquiries which Clara had been making. But he was unable to relieve her of a single tittle of the grievous embarrassment in which she found herself placed: for the name of Beckford was entirely unknown to him. Although extremely polite, and indeed kindly courteous, towards Clara, Valentine was nevertheless so much absorbed in his own sorrows, whatever they were, that he did not seek to protract his interview with her;—and she had too much good taste to remain any longer than was necessary. She accordingly took her leave: but Valentine insisted upon handing her into the vehicle—and it struck her that he regarded

her with a feeling of compassion and interest as she bowed to him from the window of the coach in acknowledgment of his polite attention.

What plan was she now to adopt? One course alone remained: and that was to call upon the bankers through whom Mr. Beckford had been wont to remit the half-yearly stipend to the Canterbury agent. Thither she accordingly directed the coachman to proceed; and in a quarter of an hour the vehicle stopped again. She alighted—entered the vast banking establishment of an eminent firm at the West End—and made the requisite inquiry. The only answer she could obtain was to the effect that it was perfectly true the money had been for some years remitted through that bank—but that Mr. Beckford himself was altogether unknown there—that he had no account at the establishment—and that the cash to meet the half-yearly draughts, had on each occasion been brought by a ticket-porter or some other stranger of whom the clerks took no particular notice.

We need hardly observe that Clara Stanley quitted the bank in despair. Her last hope was gone—and it seemed too painfully certain that everything which regarded Mr. Beckford was involved in the darkest, deepest, most unaccountable mystery. There was no alternative but to hasten back to Canterbury and bear the sad intelligence to poor Louisa,—the intelligence that her mission had failed, and that the only hope which stood between them and beggary was annihilated!

Such was the harrowing reflection that occupied poor Clara Stanley as she rode back in the hackney-coach to the Cross Keys in Gracechurch Street. On reaching the tavern she dismissed the vehicle and made inquiries relative to the hours at which the stages started for Canterbury. She was directed to the booking-office close at hand: but short though the distance was, she was annoyed by an ill-looking, shabbily-dressed fellow, who pushed rudely two or three times against her. She was therefore glad when she crossed the threshold of the coach-office; and having engaged a place inside the first stage that was to start on the morrow, she felt for her purse to pay the deposit. But behold! her money was gone—and it instantaneously flashed to her mind that she had been robbed by the ruffian whose rudeness had so much annoyed her.

Driven almost to madness by this new calamity, the poor young lady rushed from the coach-office in pursuit of the villain; and, in her inexperience of London, she fancied that she might overtake him. But she had not sped many yards along the crowded street, when her natural good sense, breaking in upon the confusion of her ideas, convinced her of the utter hopelessness of her endeavour to catch the pick-pocket in such a labyrinth as London;—and in a mood of the deepest despondency, she paused to reflect what course she should pursue.

At this juncture she was accosted by an elderly female whose good apparel, matronly demeanour, and urbane address constituted a sufficient guarantee for her respectability in the estimation of the inexperienced Clara Stanley;—and in answer to the questions which were put to her, in a voice of compassionate interest, the young lady unhesitatingly revealed all the causes of her perplexity.

But what followed from this confiding frankness on her part?—was that elderly female a friend whom heaven had raised up to protect the maiden, or a wretch whom hell had prompted to lead her to destruction?

The solution of the mystery will develop itself hereafter.

SECOND INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

Let the reader bear in mind that the visit of Clara Stanley to London occurred in the middle of July, 1814. The scene which we are about to record, took place a few weeks earlier:—namely, at the beginning of June in the same year.

It was eleven o'clock at night; and a lady sate alone in her bed-chamber, at a beautiful villa situated a short distance from London, in the neighbourhood of Blackheath.

This lady was four or five and twenty years of age, and of remarkable beauty. Her toilette was arranged for the night: her hair was confined beneath an elegant lace cap—her superb form was enveloped in a loose wrapper the snowy whiteness of which was not more stainless than the swelling bosom which it half revealed—and her naked feet, were thrust into red morocco slippers. But though thus prepared to retire to rest—though her maid was dismissed for the night—and though the chamber-door was carefully locked,—yet did the lady remain seated in an arm-chair, with the lamp burning on the table in the middle of the apartment.

This chamber was spacious and elegantly furnished. It was upon the first floor, and had one large bow-window looking upon the beautiful grounds in the midst of which the villa, which stood detached from any other house, was situated. Opening from the bed-chamber was a bath-room, which likewise served as a dressing-closet for the master of the mansion—a circumstance that was denoted by the shaving apparatus and other articles of the male toilette which were scattered about. The bath itself was not sunk in the floor, but was raised upon it; and there was a large heavy lid to cover it when not in use.

Having glanced at these particulars, we must return to the lady, who still remained seated in the bed-chamber, but with an air of listening attention. Presently there was a noise as of some light gravel thrown up at the window; and the countenance of the fair one became all in a moment animated with joy. A rich crimson

flush spread, like a stream of lava, over her face —her neck—her very bosom;—and the voluptuous flood of light poured into her magnificent eyes. Starting from her seat, she extinguished the lamp—opened the casement—and then took from a drawer a ladder made of silken cord. Having fastened one end to a strong iron bar which was used to secure the shutters when closed, she gently lowered the ladder out of the window. All this was the work of a few moments; and the proceeding was accomplished with as much noiseless precaution as celerity.

The lady had placed the iron bar in such a manner that the ends rested against the upright joints of the window-frame; and as the silken cord was strongly knitted, the means of ascent to the chamber were thus rendered perfectly safe. The moon was shining—the night was clear, calm, and beautiful: but the villa stood so far from the main road that no one passing along it could have observed what was taking place at the open window, now that the lamp was extinguished inside the room.

In a few moments after the silken ladder was lowered from the casement, a gentleman ascended and made his entry into the apartment. The ladder was instantaneously drawn up—the window was closed—and the lady and her lover were locked in a fond embrace.

We have already said that she was ravishingly beautiful: we must now observe that the gentleman was remarkably handsome and of a fine commanding figure. He was perhaps as much as forty-three or forty-four years of age—but his appearance was that of a man considerably younger: for his hair was black as jet, without a single streak of silver—his teeth were superb—and his noble brow was as smooth and free from wrinkles as that of the Belvidere Apollo. And his was one of those full rich voices which, when breathing the accents of love and the vows of passion, no woman can hear without an emotion—scarcely with impunity. His manners, too, were fascinating to a degree—his conversation was invested with all the charms that a brilliant intellect could supply—and his experience of human nature rendered him an adept in the practice of all those little artifices which are too well calculated to secure and rivet the affections of a tender, weak, and confiding woman.

It was not extraordinary, then, if this gentleman, so handsome in person and so polished in manners, should have won the love of a being so many years younger than himself. And that she *did* love him—fervidly, fondly, adoringly—was evidenced by the impassioned warmth of the embrace and the glowing ardour of the caresses wherewith she welcomed him.

"At length we meet again, my well beloved," he said, in the most melting accents of that voice which seemed to sink deep into her soul every time she heard it. "It is an age since last I pressed thee in my arms and experienced paradise in the rapturous enjoyment of thy kisses!"

"Yes—two long months since last we met *in secret*," returned the lady: "and no two years of my life ever seemed longer! But *he*," she added, evidently alluding to her husband, to breathe even whose name would have appeared to her a desecration of this love which, criminal though it were, was so ineffably sweet in comparison with any feeling she would possibly entertain towards that husband,—"but *he* has been so much at home lately that I began to fear he had grown uxorious and intended to tie himself to my apron-strings."

"But at length he has afforded us an opportunity of meeting again!" said the lover, as he contemplated with unfeigned rapture that splendid countenance upon which the slanting moon-beams fell through the casement. "Oh! you cannot imagine the joy which filled my heart this morning when I received your dear note telling me that your husband was to be absent for two days! Would to heaven that he might never return! But all day long I have been tormented with the fear that he might change his intention—that he might remain at home——and it was not until the moment that I reached the boundary-wall of the garden ere now and saw the signal-lamp burning in your chamber—*this* chamber, dearest, where I am at length able to fold you once more in my arms——"

But at the instant that the lips of the lady and her lover met in another burning, impassioned kiss, a furious knocking at the door and ringing of the house-bell startled them terribly and filled their souls with consternation.

"My husband!" cried the lady in despair. "O God! if he should suspect—if his absence were a mere pretext——he will kill me—he will kill me!"

"Courage, dearest—courage!" said her paramour, summoning all his presence of mind to his aid. "It is impossible that he can have discovered anything——our precautions have been too well taken."

"But you must fly, my beloved—you must fly!" exclaimed the lady. "Ah! the household is already disturbed——the footman is descending to open the front door——My God! in a few moments it will be too late——"

"Conceal me somewhere, dearest—anywhere —and let us trust to chance!" said the lover, as he sustained his terrified mistress in his arms and endeavoured to reassure her with the fondest caresses.

"Conceal you!—where?" she murmured in utter bewilderment: then, as a thought flashed to her mind, she said in a rapid whisper, "Ah! I recollect——come—the bath-room!"

"Yes—in the bath itself," observed the lover, catching joyfully at the idea: "and when *he* is fast asleep, you can give me my release."

The arrangement was instantly carried into effect. The guilty pair exchanged one fond

rapid kiss—the lover then concealed himself in the bath—and the lady closed the lid upon him.

Scarcely was this done, when rapid steps were heard ascending the stairs; and the lady, having lighted the lamp, unlocked the door of her chamber. This was a fearful moment of suspense and terror for her—and she trembled to meet the looks of her husband who was approaching. But a few words which he immediately uttered in a kind tone, suddenly relieved her of those excruciating alarms; and she hastily inquired what had happened to bring him home sooner than he had intended.

"Do not be frightened, my love," said the husband, following his beauteous wife into the bed-chamber and closing the door: "but we must leave home instantly! I have ordered the carriage to be got ready—and to-morrow morning we shall breakfast at Dover. Thence we must proceed without delay to France, where we shall have to remain until this accursed business has blown over."

"What do you mean? and what misfortune has happened?" exclaimed the lady, now fixing her eyes in mingled astonishment and alarm upon her husband, who was a man of about fifty years of age,—old enough to be her father,—and of somewhat dissipated appearance.

"I have killed young Sefton in a duel," he observed, in answer to the agitated queries which his wife put to him,—"a duel fought across the dinner-table at Lord Herbert's——"

"A duel!" echoed the lady, her blood curdling with horror: and her looks involuntarily settled on her husband's hands to see if they were stained with evidences of the tragedy.

"Yes—a duel with pistols—and I shot him through the heart," he cried, with a sort of ferocious exultation in his tone and manner: and now his wife observed that his countenance was flushed with drinking as well as with excitement. "But let us hasten our preparations—— you must lose no time to dress yourself, my love—— I am really sorry in the extreme thus to disturb you——"

"Then you really intend me to accompany you?" said the lady, with a half-imploring, half-deprecating look. "Could I not follow you to-morrow—or next day—and in the meantime settle any little affairs which this hurried departure would leave in sad confusion?"

"No, my dear—you will accompany me," replied her husband: and as he gave this answer with a laconic sternness, he flung upon his wife a look which convinced her that any farther remonstrance would be useless.

The lady accordingly summoned her maid—for the entire household was now up and stirring: and in a few minutes both the bed-chamber and the bath-room were thrown into the confusion invariably attendant on hurried preparations for travelling. Trunks, band-boxes, and portmanteaus were brought in—clothes were scattered about—cupboards and drawers emptied of their contents. The lady purposely caused her own trunk to be placed upon the bath while it was being packed, so that there might be no chance of the lid's removal by any accident until after the departure—and *then*, the frail one hoped, her lover would have an opportunity of liberating himself.

As a matter of course the lady hurried her preparations as much as possible; and her husband was too anxious to start, to create any delay on his side. The carriage drove round to the front door—the boxes were speedily strapped upon the roof—the valet and the maid who were to accompany their master and mistress, were in readiness—and all the arrangements were apparently completed. But the lady now lingered in her chamber at the last moment—and her husband was waiting impatiently upon the threshold to escort her down stairs. What did she seek in the cupboards and drawers that she was ransacking?—what was she searching after amidst the clothes that were tossing about on the floor? The silken ladder, which she had hitherto forgotten in the hurry and confusion of the incidents of the last hour!

She dared not leave it behind to be found by the servants who were to remain in charge of the house: for would it not tell a tale—or at least give rise to suspicions—most fatally injurious to herself? But where was it? She felt certain that it had not been packed up by accident amongst her own apparel; and it must consequently be somewhere about the room. Burning with the fever of suspense and tortured by alarms, the lady searched in all directions—while her husband, who remained upon the threshold, was becoming more and more impatient.

"What are you looking for?" he demanded.

"A ring which I have dropped—one that you gave me," was the excuse that rose readily to her lips.

"Never mind it, my love," he exclaimed, considerably softened. "I will purchase you a handsomer one in France."

"But I am resolved to find this," said the lady. "You can go down—I will follow you in a moment."

"No:—unless I stay here to hurry you on, you will be another hour. I know what ladies are in that respect."

At this moment his wife discovered the *real* object of her search—the silken ladder—lying amidst some of the articles which had been tossed forth from the drawers. An ejaculation of joy fell from her lips—and her husband asked if she had found the ring.

"Yes—I see it glittering in the dressing-closet," she replied: and springing into that place, she lifted the lid of the bath and threw in the silken ladder.

This was done as rapidly and as noiselessly as possible. She had no time to look into the

VENETIA TRELAWNEY.

bath, nor even allow her hand to linger there for a moment that her lover might press it to his lips: and she dared not murmur a syllable —no, not even in the faintest whisper. The lid was raised and closed again, quick as the eye winks,—and a fearful load was removed from the lady's mind now that the silken ladder was in the keeping of her paramour, who, she felt assured, would understand wherefore it was thus consigned to his care.

Having no farther excuse nor wish for delay, she took her husband's arm and accompanied him down to the carriage, which immediately whirled them away at a rapid pace.

But how terminated the adventure of the bath-room?—who was the distinguished individual beloved by that lady of transcendent beauty?—and was her frailty to remain concealed from her husband and pass unpunished? These questions will be answered in the course of the following narrative.

CHAPTER I.

THE PARTY OF SIX.

It was in the middle of September, 1814, that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, now Regent of the kingdom, accepted an invitation to dine with one of his oldest and most faithful friends, the Marquis of Leveson.

But it was an express understanding that the party was to be altogether a private one—consisting of gentlemen only—and that the number present was to be limited to six, including the Prince himself. For his Royal Highness had his whims and caprices in this respect; and, glad to escape at times from ceremonial banquets and formal en-

tertainments, he enjoyed nothing so much as a convivial little festival at which he could throw off all reserve and abandon himself to the full license of the occasion. In plain terms, the Prince was seldom more happy than when in the company of a few male friends, with whom he could indulge in the ribald jest, the obscene song, and the brimming glass, without constraint and without fear of being talked about next day.

The party of six accordingly met at the splendid mansion of the Marquis of Leveson in Albemarle Street. The noble host was a widower, and already on the bleak side of sixty. He was a man who had made pleasure the study of his life, and expended his enormous annual revenues upon the most unprofitable of pursuits. His house was fitted up with oriental luxury and palatial magnificence; and rumour had whispered that within those walls there was a suite of apartments containing pictures and statues of such a character as to excite maddening desires even in the breast of the sternest anchorite or the coldest virgin.

In personal appearance the Marquis was short, thin, but well made; and what with an admirable wig, a brilliant set of false teeth, dyed whiskers, the use of all the choicest cosmetics, and the artistic skill of a Parisian tailor, his lordship indemnified himself as much as possible against the ravages of time.

The Prince of Wales was now fifty-two years of age and upwards. He was corpulent in person—and his cheeks were bloated and puffy: but his well proportioned limbs, his commanding aspect, his lofty brow, and the florid complexion which imparted an air of healthfulness to his countenance, mitigated the effect of that general obesity. He wore a wig—and he also patronised cosmetics: but he was not a quarter so much indebted to art as was his friend Lord Leveson. For his Royal Highness's teeth were still in excellent preservation; and as he had shaved off his whiskers, there was no necessity to use hair-dye.

The four guests who had been invited by the Marquis to meet his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, shall be enumerated in due order.

The first was the Earl of Curzon—a tall, fine, handsome man, of about thirty; with a dark olive complexion, jet black curling hair, a Grecian profile, and superb teeth. He had been married three or four years to a lady of rank, beauty, and wealth: but his habits were far from domestic—and he was indeed inveterate in the pursuit of pleasure.

The second guest was Colonel Malpas — a gentleman of about the same age as the Earl of Curzon. He was tall, slender, and delicate-looking—with light hair, a brown moustache, and carefully curled whiskers. He spoke in a drawling tone—was languid in his movements and affected in his manners—and was, in fact, the veritable type of a "drawing-room soldier." Pecuniary matters, or some other causes concerning which there appeared to be a little mystery, had led to his marriage with the daughter of a retired butcher: and although his wife was an heiress, the match proved horribly disgusting and positively shocking to the aristocratic families with which Colonel Malpas claimed relationship.

The third guest was Sir Douglas Huntingdon—a young baronet of about six or seven and twenty, who on attaining his majority had come into the enjoyment of an entailed estate yielding immense revenues, which he lavished in all kinds of fashionable dissipation. He was good-looking, but had a somewhat sickly appearance: indeed, it was no fault on his part if a naturally good constitution were not speedily undermined by late hours, hard drinking, the excitement of the gaming table, and excessive sensuality in respect to women. He was unmarried, and seemed likely to remain so.

The fourth member of the delectable group was Mr. Horace Sackville. This young gentleman, who had no titular prefix to his name, was known as the nephew—though scandal whispered that he was in plain reality the son—of a certain Miss Bathurst, of whom we shall have to speak more hereafter. For the present suffice it to say that this lady was tolerably well off, moved in the first circles, and was believed to have been at one time on very intimate terms with the Prince of Wales. At all events, her nephew Horace was a special favourite with his Royal Highness, who frequently made him handsome presents and otherwise treated him with marked kindness. The young gentleman, who was about four-and-twenty and of very handsome appearance, had the good taste not to presume upon the species of confidence which he thus enjoyed with the Prince: indeed, he was rather reserved and bashful than otherwise; — but he could sing an excellent song when "drawn out"—and this circumstance, together with the known fact that he was a favourite with the Prince, was the cause of his being one of the "select few" on the present occasion.

The reader is now thoroughly introduced to the party of six to whom we alluded at the commencement of this chapter. The banquet to which they sate down, was composed of the choicest delicacies that could possibly tempt the appetite or that wealth could procure But then Lord Leveson kept a French cook, at a salary of a thousand guineas a-year: and he had imported a native East Indian expressly for the purpose of dressing curries and making mulligitawncy. His lordship, moreover, paid five hundred a-year to his "wine-taster"—an individual whose sole occupation was to select the produce of the finest vintages for his noble master's cellar. Then, at his lordship's country-seats there were pineries and vineries, and hot-houses of all descriptions—and in his lordship's parks there were fat bucks—and his lordship's immense wealth moreover commanded the choicest produce of all the markets. It would therefore have been astonishing indeed if the banquet were not pre-eminently satisfactory, both as regarded the choice dainties and the exquisite wines.

Let us suppose the cloth removed—the dessert placed upon the table—the domestics retired—and the wine circulating freely: we may now listen to the conversation which is passing amongst the six personages seated at the board.

"I am indebted to you, Leveson," said the Prince Regent, as he sipped his wine, "for the most agreeable entertainment I have experienced for some months past. This is really a new pleasure; and upon my word, in these days of monotony and sameness, I can well understand the feeling which induced the Persian monarch to offer a reward for some original and unexplored enjoyment.'

"Does your Royal Highness mean that London

has grown so uncommonly dull?" asked Colonel Malpas, in his most elaborated drawing-room drawl.

"Most assuredly I do!" exclaimed the Prince. "For my part, I see none but the same faces wherever I go—at Court, at entertainments, in the parks—'tis all the same, until the very aspect of society becomes so insipid——"

"In fact, sir," remarked Lord Leveson,—for the habit had recently sprung up in Court circles to address the Princes of the Blood as "sir," so as to avoid the frequent repetition of the more formal mode of "your Royal Highness,"—"in fact, sir, you look upon the female portion of the fashionable world as a galaxy of beauties whose charms lose their power by becoming familiar to the eye—and therefore you desire to welcome the advent of some new star?"

"By heaven! talk of new stars," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, in a tone of enthusiasm, "what planet can be more bewitching than the one that has so lately entered our sublunary sphere?"

"Ah! I know to whom you allude," ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "I saw her riding in her carriage this very day——"

"Yes—she was pointed out to me in the park last Sunday afternoon," interrupted Colonel Malpas, speaking rather more quickly than was his wont. "She is a positive angel!"

"No—her beauty is not of a celestial character," remarked Sir Douglas. "It is the voluptuous loveliness which one's imagination pictures in an odalisque, reclining languidly on the cushion in some orient seraglio."

"By Jove! 'tis an admirable description of her rich, luxuriant, sensuous style of beauty!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "Never in all my life did I behold so delicious a creature!"

"Who, in the name of fortune, is this model of loveliness that has turned all your heads?" demanded the Prince Regent, his curiosity now deeply excited.

"What!" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson: "is it possible that your Royal Highness has not heard of Venetia Trelawney?"

"As mysterious as she is beautiful," added the Earl of Curzon.

"And as virtuous as she is incomprehensible," remarked Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"Aye—but who can vouch that she is virtuous," demanded Colonel Malpas,—"since no one appears to be able to get acquainted with her? In fact, every body I meet is talking of her—and not a soul knows her even to speak to."

"It is precisely because she gives not the slightest encouragement to any one, that I pronounce her to be virtuous," replied the dissipated baronet. "A certain Duke, who shall be nameless, sent her a blank cheque the other day, with an intimation that she might fill it up to any amount she chose, provided she would look kindly upon him: and she returned it in an envelope, without deigning even to pen a syllable of comment."

"Venetia Trelawney?" said the Prince Regent, repeating the name two or three times in a musing tone: "Venetia Trelawney? Surely I have heard of her before? By the bye, Horace," he exclaimed, a sudden recollection striking him, "was it not you who mentioned her to me?"

"I believe I said something on the subject to your Royal Highness," answered Mr. Sackville, with a certain embarrassment of manner: but instantly recovering himself, he added, "In fact, I now remember that I have once or twice spoken to you, sir, relative to this paragon of beauty."

"Ah! then you also have seen her, Horace?" cried the Prince Regent. "But you should have taken more pains to make me aware that there was such a charming novelty in our great metropolis."

"When I alluded to Miss Trelawney, sir, you appeared indifferent," said young Sackville; "and I did not therefore venture to dwell upon a topic in which your Royal Highness took no interest."

"I suppose my impression at the time was that you were speaking of some beauty of the ordinary stamp—the commonplace average of female attractions," observed the Prince. "But if you had told me that this was a grand exception to the general rule—a perfect rarity of the species—I should have instantaneously become as interested in Venetia Trelawney as I am now."

"Ah! she is a woman for whose sake a man might sell his soul to Satan, if such a sacrifice would purchase but a single hour of her love," said the old Marquis of Leveson, his mouth watering at the bare thought of the pleasures which his imagination depicted.

"And you tell me that no one knows her?" exclaimed the Prince, in astonishment. "Here am I surrounded by the most inveterate pleasure-hunters in all London; and yet I am assured that not one of you has contrived by any stratagem to scrape acquaintance with Miss Trelawney?"

"Such, nevertheless, appears to be the fact," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "I have inquired of all my friends if they could introduce me to Venetia—and the universal response is, '*My dear fellow, I am racking my brains day and night to procure an introduction for myself.*'"

"This is most extraordinary!" exclaimed the Prince. "Do you mean me to understand that she has not a single friend or acquaintance in all London—but that she suddenly dropped from the clouds in the midst of a sphere which by all accounts she is so eminently calculated to adorn?"

"I mean to say," answered the dissipated baronet, "that a few weeks ago this paragon of loveliness appeared for the first time in the park. She was riding in a carriage, accompanied by a duenna-like lady of a certain age. Of course every one was ravished at the beauty of the unknown fair one. '*Who is she?*' was the universal question. No one can tell. A few days afterwards the report circulated that her name had been ascertained, and that it was Venetia Trelawney. Only conceive that delightful, romantic name of Venetia! '*Where does she live?*' was the next question which I asked: but I found that every one else was asking precisely the same thing. Well, in a few days more this query was solved also. Venetia Trelawney dwells in a sweet place, called Acacia Cottage, at Knightsbridge. '*Who is that duenna-like female that invariably accompanies her?*' was the third question prompted by an excruciating curiosity—or rather, a tender interest. But this point was more difficult to solve. However, in due time it became pretty well understood that the elderly lady is no relation, but a mere companion or friend; and she is said to be most respectably connected."

"Never mind the duenna," exclaimed the Prince. "Tell us about Venetia Trelawney—the charming Venetia."

"I have nothing more to tell your Royal Highness," answered the baronet. "You now know as much of the transcendent Miss Trelawney as I do myself."

"Depend upon it, she is some adventuress," observed the Prince, "who seeks to obtain notoriety by surrounding herself with an air of mystery."

"Not so," exclaimed the baronet: "for I forgot to add that she is reputed to be well off. At all events, she lives in good style—though in a very secluded manner; and she pays her tradesmen with scrupulous regularity."

"Ah! I see you have been pushing your inquiries in all possible quarters," said the Prince, laughing.

"I admit the impeachment, sir," returned the baronet. "But as for Venetia being an adventuress, it is altogether out of the question. The circumstance relative to the Duke's blank cheque proves that she is not mercenary, and that her charms at all events are not to be purchased by gold."

"Your reasoning is certainly most forcible," said his Royal Highness. "What is the age of the heroine?"

"She looks about four-and-twenty, I should say," answered Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"No such thing!" ejaculated the Earl of Curzon. "One-and-twenty at the outside."

"Well, I should not mind wagering heavily that she is six-and-twenty," drawled out Colonel Malpas.

"In truth," observed the Marquis of Leveson, "she is one of those magnificent beings whose features bear the stamp of youthful loveliness, but whose forms are matured in the most luxuriant proportions: and therefore it is difficult to judge her precise age."

"But at all events," said the Prince Regent, "she is old enough to make us wonder that, with such transcendent loveliness, she should still be unmarried. What do you think, Horace?" he inquired, turning towards his favourite. "There you sit, as silent and reserved as possible—although the wine is exhilarating and the topic of discourse exciting to a degree."

"I was listening with attention, sir, to the various remarks passing around," said Sackville. "But with respect to Miss Venetia Trelawney, I have already spoken in eulogistic terms of her to your Royal Highness. In fact, it is impossible to have seen her once, without thinking of her ever afterwards."

"And how often have you seen her, Horace?" inquired the Prince.

"Perhaps a dozen times, sir," was the response: and a flush passed over the naturally pale countenance of Horace Sackville.

"Is she really as beautiful as our friends here have represented?" asked the Prince Regent: "and do you also think she is virtuous and well-intentioned?"

"No language is sufficiently powerful to do justice to her loveliness," said Horace: "and as for her virtue and respectability, I should think that, after the anecdote we have heard relative to the Duke's cheque, your Royal Highness would alone succeed in winning the favours of the adorable Venetia."

"Upon what basis do you found your argument, Horace?" asked the Regent, smiling complacently.

"Upon the fact that if Miss Trelawney has rejected the proposals of a Duke, she can only be triumphed over by a Prince who will sooner or later become a King:"—and as Horace Sackville gave this explanation, he narrowly watched its effect upon his royal patron.

"By heaven! you almost persuade me to undertake the conquest of this fair one," said the Prince. "But what if she be intent only on forming some brilliant match? It would be but natural—and hence the extreme circumspection of her conduct."

"If marriage were her particular aim," remarked Horace Sackville, "she could doubtless have accomplished it long ago. Such charms as her's do not go begging. Besides—it is well known that she has refused several splendid offers ——"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "How can this be known? And if it is so, then must she be acquainted with the noblemen or gentlemen whose suit she has rejected—and surely at least one of these discarded adorers would be amongst the circle of our friends: whereas not a soul now present has been enabled to obtain an introduction to her."

"I only repeated one of the rumours current relative to Venetia," said Sackville, assuming a careless tone and indifferent manner. "But I fancy there can be no doubt that Miss Trelawney has received several brilliant offers, though coming from individuals who are personally unknown to her, but who, being captivated by her loveliness, have presumed on their rank and fortune to write tender billets laying their hearts at her feet."

"And from the refusals experienced, you naturally infer that she has no particular ambition with regard to marriage?" said the Prince Regent, interrogatively.

"We are all delivering our opinions, such as we have formed them," answered Sackville: "and after all, seeing how little we know of the lady, our ideas concerning her can only be the veriest conjectures. Well, then, my belief is that Venetia is a being whose mind must be as extraordinary as her beauty: and inasmuch as she has rejected many brilliant offers of marriage—or at all events, as it is quite clear that endowed as she is with such transcendent loveliness, it must be her own fault that she is still single—there are but two inferences to draw."

"What are they?" inquired the Prince Regent.

"Either that she possesses a mind so pure that she is resolved never to bestow her hand where she cannot give her heart likewise," said Horace: "or else that she cherishes a towering ambition, which soars even above marriage and which prompted her to decline the opportunity of becoming the mistress of a Duke."

"Then what on earth could she hope to become?" demanded the Regent.

"The mistress of a Prince or a King," returned Horace: and the sidelong glance which he threw rapidly upon his royal patron, was of searching and penetrating keenness.

"You rogue!" ejaculated the Regent, bursting out into a good-natured laugh and laying his hand on Sackville's shoulder,—"you wish to persuade

me into undertaking the conquest of this mysterious fair one? Come—don't deny it—I see that such is your aim; and I dare say you think there will be fine sport and exciting amusement."

"Really, sir," faltered Horace Sackville, blushing deeply and looking much confused, "I hope——"

"Hope, my dear young friend!—what, hope you have not given me offence, eh?" exclaimed the Prince Regent. "On the contrary, I ought to be flattered by the idea which you have formed to the effect that if any one succeeds in obtaining the smiles of the beauteous Venetia Trelawney, I shall be the man. But suppose your belief to be well founded, I am not going to monopolise for myself all chances of possessing the charmer;—and if I do enter upon this love-campaign, it shall not be to the exclusion of my friends."

"But there is not a soul now present," said the Earl of Curzon, "who has not entertained views and hopes with regard to Venetia: and surely, sir, you do not mean that we should all launch out into bold and active rivalry with your Royal Highness?"

"Indeed, but I do though," exclaimed the Regent: "and since we are to have sport, let it be of the most thrillingly exciting character. What say you? Shall we all start upon equal terms in the race, with love and beauty as the prize?"

"Capital! capital!" cried the dissipated baronet. "A bumper of Burgundy to welcome the happy thought!"

"Yes—the proposal is not bad, by any means," drawled forth Colonel Malpas, as he caressed his moustache.

"I am quite agreeable to it," said the Earl of Curzon.

"And I am one in the race, remember," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson. "But what says Sackville?"

"Oh! he will be a gladiator likewise, in this warfare of love," cried the Prince Regent.

"Assuredly, sir," returned Horace—but with a significant expression of countenance, which however passed unnoticed in the general excitement created by the proposition of his Royal Highness.

"Now, my good friends," resumed the Prince, "it is absolutely necessary that we should propound and agree to some general rules to be observed in this love-campaign: otherwise we shall be clashing with each other in a manner that must inevitably lead to confusion and expose us all to ridicule."

"Hear! hear!" cried the attentive listeners.

"Let us, then, begin with the understanding that we preserve an inviolable secrecy relative to our compact," proceeded his Royal Highness; "and that we also forbear from any sinister or illegitimate means of undermining each other."

"Agreed!" exclaimed the voices of the rest.

"And inasmuch as perhaps some of us, if not all," continued the Regent, "may by various means succeed in procuring an introduction to Miss Trelawney, the result of which may be to obtain permission to call at Acacia Cottage,—will it not be as well if we make arrangements so as to preclude the chance of two or more of us meeting there at the same time?"

"But how can this be accomplished?" inquired the Earl of Curzon.

"Easily enough," answered the Prince Regent. "There are six of us—and there are six days in the week, excluding Sunday. Let a particular day be allotted to each for making calls, sending presents, serenading, or taking any steps in which there might be a possibility of clashing with similar proceedings on the part of the rest. For instance, Monday for one—Tuesday for another——"

"The proposal is excellent!" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "I shall stamp my approval of it in a bumper."

"Yes—the proposal is good enough," drawled forth Colonel Malpas. "But how shall we allot the days?"

"According to rank," returned the baronet.

"Oh! fie," ejaculated the Prince. "How do you think I would agree to a plan which would place me first upon the list—I, who have disavowed all monopoly and repudiated all selfishness in the proceeding! No—let us ballot fairly. Come, Horace—write all our names on pieces of paper; and toss them into a vase or urn."

This was done: and as the Prince called the six days one after the other, the names were individually drawn forth from the splendid porcelain vase into which the pieces of paper whereon they had been written were flung. The following was the result:—

Monday—The Earl of Curzon.
Tuesday—Sir Douglas Huntingdon.
Wednesday—Colonel Malpas.
Thursday—The Prince Regent.
Friday—The Marquis of Leveson.
Saturday—Mr. Sackville.

The announcements were received one after another with much merriment; and the order wherein the names stood, gave rise to many witty jokes, repartees, and humourous retorts. The wine circulated freely; and bumpers were drained to the health of Venetia Trelawney.

"By the bye, my dear friend," said his Royal Highness, as an idea struck him during a pause in the conversation and a temporary lull in the hilarity,—"I do not think that we have made our arrangements as complete as they might be rendered. Because it does not strike me as fair that if one of us should succeed in gaining the favours of this charmer, the rest should continue to persecute her with their importunities. Besides, the successful lover would naturally desire to enjoy the privilege of visiting his mistress as often and whenever he chose, without being limited to one special day in every week. And lastly, as we are all starting in the same race, it would be but just and natural that we should know *who* wins and *when* he wins."

"Most assuredly!" cried the baronet. "I wonder that these points did not strike any of us before. Our compact would be wretchedly deficient without the settlement of such important matters."

"And should not the victor receive a testimonial in acknowledgment of his skill, tact, and perseverance?" exclaimed Colonel Malpas, abandoning the habitual drawl in his anxiety to proffer this suggestion—by which, we imagine, he was vain enough to hope that he should be certain to profit.

"Venetia Trelawney and six thousand guineas would be no mean reward to crown a man's labours," said the Earl of Curzon. "What is the general opinion? Shall we make a sweepstake for six thousand——a thousand a-piece?"

"With all my heart," exclaimed the Prince. "The Marquis of Leveson will act as treasurer; and by twelve o'clock to-morrow we must each send our cheque to his lordship for the amount. I will remit Sackville's along with my own, as I have some money of his in my hands just at present."

Horace threw a look of gratitude upon the Prince in acknowledgment of this delicate manner of paying for him—the truth being, as a matter of course, that His Royal Highness held no funds belonging to his youthful favourite.

"Now, then," said the baronet, "we thoroughly understand ourselves thus far. Six thousand guineas are to be subscribed as a sweepstakes to be given to the fortunate individual who shall make Venetia Trelawney his mistress. But the proof of the conquest?" he added inquiringly.

"Oh! some proof satisfactory to the rest must be afforded by the victor, as a matter of course," observed the Prince. "But that will depend upon circumstances. At all events, whenever the siege is at an end, and the citadel has surrendered, the happy conqueror should hold himself bound to communicate the fact to the rest——"

"He must give a banquet," suggested the Earl of Curzon, "at which the proofs of his victory will be adduced—be they letters, or whatever they may: and then the six thousand guineas will be duly handed over to him."

"The compact is now as perfect as six clever fellows can possibly make it," said the baronet. "Pass the bottle, Sackville."

And the bottle was passed and re-passed again and again, until all present, with the exception of Horace, were in such a happy condition that if asked whether they stood upon their heads or their heels, they could not have very easily responded to the query.

CHAPTER II.

VENETIA.

It was the Monday following the banquet given at the Marquis of Leveson's house; and at about nine o'clock in the morning Venetia Trelawney was breakfasting in an elegantly-furnished boudoir at Acacia Cottage.

She was alone, and in the most charming deshabillée: or, to speak more correctly, having just stepped forth from the bed-chamber adjoining, and fearful of no intrusive gaze, she was in the most negligent undress.

As her splendid form lounged half reclining upon a sofa, the downy cushions of which softly yielded to her pressure, an undefinable air of voluptuous languor seemed to characterise her whole person. The bright shoulders were completely bare; and the superb bust was every now and then as fully exposed, when the slightest movement displaced the muslin wrapper which she had so loosely thrown on.

On rising from her couch she had taken a bath; and her skin shone with a healthy animation that rendered her complexion absolutely dazzling in its transparent brightness. Upon her cheeks was that rich bloom which, far from deepening into ruddiness, was still sufficiently glowing to resemble the tint of the carnation gently combined with the vermeil of the peach. Nothing could be more exquisite than the transition with which that natural hue softened into roseate delicacy, which in its turn blended imperceptibly with the whiteness of the lily:—and on the forehead, the neck, and the bosom, the meandering veins delineated all those shades of azure which the enraptured eye loves to follow beneath the polished surface of the skin.

Venetia's countenance was a perfect oval: but notwithstanding its shape was thus fitted for a beauty of the highest order of intellectuality, it had that expression which, without being positively sleepy—much less heavy, was still full of the soft langour that steals upon the senses like the perfume of flowers on a sultry day. This effect, too, was enhanced by the slow and languishing motion of the eyes, which were not particularly large, but of the deepest, tenderest, most melting blue.

And those eyes,—as they looked forth from beneath their softly drooping lids, fringed with dark brown lashes slightly curling,—how full of love did their depths appear to be,—as if young Cupid had made his home there even before he had asserted his empire over Venetia's heart! Yet those looks were not absolutely wanton—much less did they flash with the fires of passion: but they beamed softly with a seductiveness all their own—and there was the subdued lustre of a nascent voluptousness in their deep languid gaze.

The brows that arched above those eyes were finely pencilled and well divided: and above them rose the handsome forehead which was polished as marble, without the marble's cold and settled inanimation. Her hair was of that superb auburn which in the sunshine resembles burnished gold, and in the shade wears upon its darkened surface the rich gloss that gives it the appearance of velvet smoothness. Of exceeding thickness in its luxuriant copiousness, but of exquisite fineness in the myriad filaments that made up the gorgeous mass, it was arranged in bands deepening lower than the ears, and was then gathered in a knot at the back of the well-shaped head.

But we have not yet terminated the description of Venetia's countenance. Her profile was of faultless regularity: the nose was straight and united with the forehead in that classic outline which leaves only a slight inflection to be seen. Her mouth was small and beautifully chiselled: the curve of the upper lip resembled that of Cupid's bow—while the lower lip was fuller, and slightly pouting, so that it left between its ripe richness and the chin that gentle hollow which imparts to the latter a more perfect roundness. These lips were of a delicious redness, moist as a dewy flower and luscious as a fruit of the tropics: and remaining habitually the least thing apart, they not only revealed glimpses of the brilliant teeth, but likewise added to the softly sensuous expression of the countenance.

Venetia was tall in stature—above the middle height of woman. To say that she was finely formed, would be but to convey a poor idea of the actual grandeur of her proportions. Though retaining all the first freshness of youth, and with the virgin roundness and plumpness of the contours perfectly unmarred, her shape had expanded into the glowing luxuriance of womanhood. Still was its symmetry so just—so admirable, that the sternest critic could not have desired any one charm to be diminished in

its ripe fulness or pared down on the plea of exuberance. For if the shoulders were softly rounded—if the bust developed itself in superb amplitude and swelling volume—if the arms were robust—and if the folds of the drapery described a proportionate fulness in the lower limbs,—yet was the symmetry of the whole form preserved in a harmonious perfection which left nothing to cavil at—nothing to desire!

Such was Venetia Trelawney—the young lady whose charms had been so fully discussed at the mansion of Lord Leveson, and who had become the subject of the singular agreement entered into on that occasion.

We said she was seated alone in a handsomely furnished boudoir;—and we must here observe that her residence, which bore the delightful name of Acacia Cottage, was fitted up with corresponding elegance throughout. It stood in such a position at Knightsbridge that the back windows looked upon Hyde Park, from which however the house itself was separated by a small garden.

Yet though surrounded by every comfort and even every luxury,—though possessing her carriage, and having the means of gratifying any whim or fancy which money could minister to,—and though endowed with that rare loveliness which was in itself a talisman capable of ensuring to its owner as brilliant and honourable a position as she could well aspire to,—notwithstanding all these advantages, Venetia was not entirely happy.

As she sate in her elegantly-furnished room, she frequently surprised herself in the act of heaving a sigh: and if she murmured within the depths of her soul, "I have all that I need to render me happy," there still would pass into her heart a feeling to remind her that something was wanting to stamp with truth the inwardly expressed thought. And sometimes a cloud would gather upon her brow and cast its shade over her features—and the expression of her countenance would deepen from languor into despondency. Then, starting at the end of a few minutes from a painful reverie, she would exert a strong effort to fling off that gloom;—and by throwing a glance upon a mirror facing where she indolently reclined, her vanity would be gratified by the contemplation of her own enchanting loveliness, as well as by the promises which the possession of such beauty seemed to hold forth to her exalted fancy. Then smiles would dispel the gloom from her countenance—and her features would become radiant, even to absorb that sweet drooping languor which was their wonted expression.

But what was the cause of Venetia's intervals of transitory sorrow? Was she conscious of some duty unfulfilled, or of some fault committed? Had she lost that innocence which is the pearl beyond all price, and which far exceeds the value of meretricious diamonds that may deck the brow of beauty? Or was she only trembling lest her virtue, hitherto preserved, should succumb to temptation? Had she taken some false step?—or did she feel herself in peril of taking it? Or again, did she deplore a separation from beings who were dear to her?—or lastly, was she agitated by the conflicting fears and hopes of love?

As yet we are unable to penetrate the mystery of her sorrow. But pity it was that her thoughts were not ever glowing, sunny, and enchanting as her own inimitable beauty!—pity it was that care, which had not ventured to trace a single line on her smooth and polished brow, should have been able to tighten a single chord that oscillated in her heart!

Let us suppose that it is three or four hours later on this particular day when we introduce our readers to Acacia Cottage. It is now, then, one o'clock in the afternoon;—and Venetia has gone through the routine of the toilette. Jessica, the lady's-maid—a quiet, reserved, but shrewd and faithful young woman—takes a delight in setting off the charms of her mistress to their greatest advantage. Not that they need the embellishment of art, nor the aid of factitious adornment: but still dress may develop the beauties and enhance the graces of the person, as well as mar the effect of the former or conceal the latter altogether. And therefore Jessica was well pleased when her skill had proved worthy of the being on whose toilette it was bestowed. On the present occasion the abigail was eminently successful; and if Venetia had appeared so enchantingly beautiful in her morning *negligèe*, she was not less so in a more studied costume.

Indeed, it was now that the dark silk dress which she wore displayed all the admirable harmony in the proportions of her form that we have previously endeavoured to describe: for the body of that dress was made to fit close, so that it seemed to borrow its own shape from the contours of her bust, rather than assist in any way to determine the effect of those flowing outlines. Moreover, the long skirt of the robe, reaching to the carpet on which she trod, furnished an idea of the sweeping length of limb which it nevertheless concealed, and by apparently adding to her stature, gave her a more imposing beauty.

With her charms thus set off to their fullest advantage, did Venetia repair from the boudoir to the drawing-room. She was now sunny with smiles as well as radiant in beauty; and there was a certain roguish archness in her look which seemed to intimate that she was prepared for some innocent piece of mischief.

The drawing-room occupied the first floor of the house—extending from front to back, and having windows that faced the park as well as the street. Those casements that commanded a view of the park, and indeed overlooked the little garden behind the Cottage, were now open: for the weather was beautiful and warm, and the air was filled with the fragrance of the autumn flowers that seemed to drink in the sun-light to replenish their brilliant hues.

Jessica had followed her mistress from the boudoir as far as the drawing-room door; and when Venetia, on looking into the apartment, saw that it was unoccupied, she turned towards her abigail, saying, "Where is Mrs. Arbuthnot?"

"I believe, ma'am, that she has gone to Stratton Street," replied Jessica. "But shall I ask down stairs?"

"No—it is not of any consequence," observed Venetia, whose voice was as full of melting melody as the most delicious music. "And yet I should have thought that she would remain near me at the present moment," she added—but in a low tone, as the remark was intended for herself, and not to be addressed to the abigail.

Jessica withdrew—and Miss Trelawney entered

the drawing-room, closing the door behind her. The smiles, which had for a moment fled on hearing that Mrs. Arbuthnot was not at home, now returned to her countenance;—and advancing towards the mirror, she surveyed herself with looks of joyous triumph. But suddenly altering the expression of her features, she assumed an air of haughty indignation—then of proud defiance—and then of cold contempt. Nothing could be more perfect than the manner in which she thus tutored her charming countenance to put on each successive look—especially as there was no ostensible cause to excite the feelings which those looks expressed. Nor indeed did she experience any such sentiments at the moment: for suddenly bursting into a melodious laugh, which rang merrily through the room, she flung herself upon a sofa, exclaiming, "What an excellent actress I should make!"

When her mirth had subsided, Venetia rose and advanced near one of the casements looking upon the street—or rather the Knightsbridge road: and concealing herself behind the curtain in such a manner that although she was able to see she could not herself be seen from without, she remained gazing from the casement for some minutes. But presently abandoning this position, she crossed the room and approached one of the open windows facing the park. Here she began to caress a beautiful parrot which stood upon a perch: and she likewise spoke playfully to a couple of canary-birds that were making the air tuneful from their gilt cages.

While thus occupied, Venetia observed that a gentleman had halted in the park, near the boundary-wall of her garden, and was gazing intently upon her. A sudden flush swept over her countenance as she thus caught sight of him: but without moving from the window—and indeed, without appearing to notice him at all—she continued to amuse herself with the parrot and the canaries.

Nevertheless, the veiled and sidelong glance which she from time to time flung, with rapid furtiveness, towards him, enabled her to perceive that he was a fine, tall, handsome man, of dark complexion, and apparently about thirty years of age.

Although this gentleman who was thus admiring her so steadfastly, was near enough to observe that she was of ravishing beauty, and even to form a very good idea of the particular style of this incomparable beauty, supposing him not to have been previously acquainted with it—yet was he too far off to notice either that transient flush which swept over Venetia's countenance, or the stolen looks which she ever and anon directed towards him. There he however stood, gazing up at her—while she, affecting to be utterly unconscious of the circumstance, remained at the window, toying most charmingly with her birds.

For the gentleman in the park there was something captivating and enchanting to a degree in the scene which that open casement presented to his view. The golden air which appeared to surround that beauteous woman as with a halo,—the bright flowers that bloomed in grand and grandeur on the window-ledge,—the reflection of the powerful light in the handsome gilt cages of the birds,—and the roseate back-ground formed by the pink drapery showing through the muslin curtains that likewise formed part of the hangings,—all these details made up a picture so sunny, warm, and glowing, that the spectator felt every pulse thrilling with a beatific ecstacy and his heart throbbing with the bliss of ravished emotions.

But, ah! all on a sudden an ejaculation of dismay bursts from the lips of Venetia Trelawney—and the cause is at the same instant rendered apparent by the flight of her green and golden favourite from its superb cage. The parrot has escaped some how or other—and the whirr of his wings sounds through the sultry, heavy air. But, behold! the fugitive alights upon the garden-wall—the gentleman springs forward—and the next moment the bird is safe in his custody. Then, as he holds it gently but securely in both hands, he glances up at the window; and a gracious salutation rewards him for the deed which he has so triumphantly accomplished.

"It would almost appear as if some good genius had thus furnished me with an opportunity to obtain access to the fair one!" said the gentleman to himself, as he hastened round to the front door of Acacia Cottage: and still he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses, so providential appeared the accident which all in a moment bridged the gulf that an instant before had yawned between himself and Venetia.

The front door was already opened by the time the hero of this little incident reached it—and a livery-servant, both old and ugly, was standing there to receive the parrot. But the gentleman was not to be thus stayed on the threshold of that fairy-land of which he had hitherto obtained only far-off glimpses, but which he had now acquired a sort of right to enter.

"Having had the good fortune to catch the bird," he said to the footman, "you will permit me the happiness of restoring it with my own hands to its charming mistress."

The domestic bowed an assent, as if at once struck by the reasonable nature of the demand; and, without uttering a word, he led the way up a handsome staircase to the drawing-room. And as the gentleman, still holding the parrot with a tender care in his delicately gloved hands, followed the stately domestic, he said to himself with a feeling of satisfaction, "Venetia is at all events resolved that no opportunity shall be afforded for scandal by the presence of a young or good-looking footman in her establishment."

By the time he had made this reflection, the landing was gained: and as the domestic placed his hand upon the drawing-room door, he turned to ask, "Whom shall I have the honour to announce?"

The visitor mentioned his name; and the footman immediately threw open the door, exclaiming, "The Earl of Curzon!"

CHAPTER III.

MONDAY: OR, THE FIRST SUITOR.

Miss Trelawney advanced to meet the nobleman with a slight flush upon her cheek and a soft tremulousness throughout her entire form: but the first passed immediately away—and the latter was imperceptible. It therefore seemed as if she were influenced by no particular emotions, unless they were such as were natural under the circumstances:

namely, joy at the recovery of her favourite, and gratitude towards him who now restored it.

"I know not how to express my thanks to your lordship for this attention—this kindness on your part," she said, as she received the bird from his hands.

"I am more than adequately rewarded for so small a service by the happiness and honour of forming your acquaintance, Miss Trelawney," replied the Earl, his veins tingling as if floods of ecstacy were pouring into his entire being, as he felt the touch of Venetia's hands against his own—that momentary contact being unavoidable as she took the parrot from him.

"This naughty bird," she said, as if heedless of the Earl's response—or rather appearing to treat it as a mere passing compliment suggested by the ordinary gallantry of fashionable life,—"this naughty bird has given your lordship a great deal of trouble, and I am very angry with him. There, sir—go back to your cage—and I shall not fail to assure myself that the door is well fastened in future."

"It is a beautiful parrot, Miss Trelawney," said the Earl, who had followed her to the extremity of the room where the cage stood at the open window; "and it would have been a pity to lose him. Are you fond of birds?"

"Yes—and of flowers—passionately," she replied, still bending over the cage, so that the nobleman's enraptured eyes had leisure and opportunity to wander over the superb form which thus remained in an attitude so well adapted to display every contour and set off every grace.

"And yet the birds cannot fully appreciate, while the flowers are of course inanimately unable to comprehend, all this love which you bestow upon them!" said the Earl, rendering his voice soft and plaintive.

"It would really seem as if the parrot at all events was particularly ungrateful," observed Venetia, now raising her head and turning her eyes towards the Earl: but instantly reverting her looks to the cage, she said, "And yet the endeavour of the poor little being to escape, is only the reward which we selfish mortals ought to expect for our cruelty in bringing it away from its native clime, and shutting it up in this gilded prison."

"Do you consider yourself cruel, then, in keeping these birds in confinement, Miss Trelawney?" asked the nobleman, scarcely able to conceal the fond ardour of the looks with which he was devouring her.

"Most certainly," she exclaimed. "And yet I have not the courage to dispense with my favourites on that account. Besides, were I to get rid of them, they might possibly fall into the hands of others who would not treat them so kindly as I."

"Henceforth I shall hate that parrot of your's, Miss Trelawney," said the Earl, with a look of mysterious significancy.

"Hate him! and why so?" she demanded, in astonishment.

"Because of his ingratitude towards you," rejoined the nobleman. "Would that I were the parrot, to be the object of so much tender solicitude——"

Miss Trelawney burst out laughing—and the Earl was covered with confusion. The compliment which he fancied to be so well-turned and to convey by innendo so delicate an avowal of his love, was received as a jest and treated with mirthfulness. His pride was wounded—and, man of the world though he was, he felt quite abashed.

"The idea was so excessively singular," exclaimed Venetia, her countenance glowing with the rich carnation that her merriment had conjured up: and, as if fatigued by the exertion of laughing, she seated herself on a sofa.

"May I be permitted to explain my meaning?" said the Earl, now putting the best possible face upon the matter and forcing himself to smile.

"I think your lordship was explicit enough," replied Venetia, with the most provoking yet charming maliciousness—so that if the Earl had wished to avenge himself, he could only have done so by killing her with kisses. "You expressed an anxiety to become a parrot——"

"*Your* parrot, Miss Trelawney," interrupted the nobleman, dropping with apparent negligence into a chair, as if he considered that the discourse had taken a turn which was likely to prolong it and therefore warranted him to be seated.

"Well, my lord," continued the lady, the smile which still lingered upon her lips revealing the rows of pearls within,—"you wished to be my parrot. Now you must really take me for a very vain—a very foolish—and very silly person, if you fancy that I can be pleased with such a compliment."

"Not for worlds would I *dis*please you, Miss Trelawney!" ejaculated the Earl, with a strong accent on the first syllable of the verb. "But I am delighted to find that you are so superior to the ordinary frivolities and idle gallantries of the day. It would be terrible indeed were a false diamond contained within so glorious a casket!"

"Another compliment!" she exclaimed, laughing. "But you will tell me when you are speaking seriously—otherwise I shall never know."

"I am speaking seriously—most seriously," said the Earl, with a look of ineffable adoration, "when I declare that you are a being for whom it were elysian happiness to live and a sainted duty to die!"

"But I require no one to die for me, my lord!" exclaimed Venetia, with looks of amazement and uncertainty—as if she were astonished at his words, but could scarcely believe that her ears had caught their sense aright.

"Then will you bid me live for you?" asked the Earl, with a movement as if he were about to fall at her feet.

"I do not understand your lordship," she said, rising from the sofa and drawing herself up to the full of her imposing height: but at the same time her looks were bent down; and her attitude was that of one who awaits an explanation which is indispensable.

"Miss Trelawney," returned the Earl of Curzon, likewise leaving his seat, and speaking in a voice which was full of unfeigned emotions,—"if you know that you are beautiful and that beauty touches the heart, then can you scarcely be at a loss to comprehend the meaning of my words."

Venetia raised her eyes slowly and fixed them upon the Earl with precisely that look of haughty indignation which she had ere now practised in the mirror. But she remained silent, as if willing to assure herself ere giving verbal expression to her anger, that she was not mistaken as to the sense and significancy of his speech.

"Listen to me, I implore you, Miss Trelawney," said the Earl, joining his hands and assuming a look of the most passionate entreaty.

"Proceed, my lord," she observed, in a cold tone and with a dignified reserve of manner, as she resumed her seat upon the sofa.

"Will you promise to hear me patiently and without interruption to the end?" asked Curzon, in a tone of appeal that was even as self-humiliating as if he were about to demand pardon for a crime.

"I will pledge myself to nothing, my lord," said Venetia. "And now the idea strikes me that it is altogether preposterous—incredible—unheard of, that so serious a conversation should arise between individuals who meet for the first time—who have not known each other quite twenty minutes—and whom the merest accident in the world brought together at all."

"It is strange, no doubt—and my conduct must appear extraordinary to a degree," returned the nobleman. "But once more I beseech you to give me a hearing and allow me to explain—perhaps to justify—myself."

"Had you not rendered me a service ere now, my lord," said Venetia, "I should at once refuse your request. But as you presume upon the obligation under which you have laid me, I have no alternative than to listen."

"Ah! Miss Trelawney," cried the Earl, now pained and grieved by the rebuke which had been conveyed in terms so cutting and yet at the same time so dignified and so thoroughly lady-like,—"if you place the matter in that point of view, I must at once retire, crushed and humiliated, from your presence! But I cannot think you so ungenerous as to refuse me the opportunity of an explanation upon terms that shall be totally irrespective of any little service which I may have been fortunate enough to render. What is your decision, Miss Trelawney?"

"Proceed, my lord," she answered, with a cold courtesy. "I will hear you on the terms you name."

"A thousand thanks!" cried the Earl, with enthusiasm. "Imagine not, Miss Trelawney, that this is the first occasion on which I have ever seen you. Since your arrival in the metropolis——"

"My arrival in the metropolis!" she exclaimed. "Why, my lord, I have lived in London all my life—from my very birth!"

"Indeed!" he ejaculated, in astonishment. "And yet the world knew you not until within the last few weeks——"

"What world does your lordship speak of?" inquired Venetia, with a look of most bewitching ingenuousness.

"The fashionable world, Miss Trelawney—the only world in which one can possibly exist, without being confounded amongst the ordinary race of mortals."

"Ah! then, this is a world of your own creating?" she said, with a tinge of irony in her voice, and with that coldly contemptuous look which she had also practised in her mirror.

"Not of my special creating, Miss Trelawney," returned the nobleman: "but a world—in fine, the sphere of fashion—the—the——"

"A singular world which is so difficult to be defined!" ejaculated Venetia. "But am I to suppose that because I have removed from the seclusion in which I was brought up from my infancy—and because, being left my own mistress by the death of my parents, I have chosen to fix my habitation in the vicinage of a park,—am I to understand, I ask, that because of all this, my position in life is changed and that I am launched as it were into what you would have me believe to be a new world?"

"What I wished you to understand, Miss Trelawney, was that your beauty, your accomplishments, your manners, and your fortune render you one of *us*—the *élite* of society—the aristocracy of the community," explained the Earl: "and I was going to observe that it was only since you came into your proper sphere a few weeks ago, that the fashionable world knew of your existence. But from the first moment that you thus condescended to appear amongst us, I have never ceased to think of you. Your image has remained impressed upon my mind: it has become the object of my contemplation by day, and of my dreams by night. I have ridden for hours round and round the park to await your appearance and catch a glimpse of your countenance as you dashed by in your charming equipage: and I have applied to every friend or acquaintance I could think of, in the hope of procuring an introduction to you. But I did not succeed: no one that I knew was more fortunate than myself in this respect. Every one was admiring you—worshipping you from a distance—talking of you—and eulogising your charms: but no one had the honour of being acquainted with you. I was almost driven to madness—and I began to wander about on foot, like one demented. In this mood was I passing through the park ere now, when I beheld you at the window. I remained to gaze upon you—to contemplate you with that idolatry which is the natural homage of a loving heart. Whether you observed me, I know not: but you stayed at the window——"

"Had I noticed your lordship," said Venetia, in a cold tone, and with haughty manner, "I should have retired from the casement. But you have already proceeded far enough—too far—with your explanations: and as no earthly good can possibly result from them, either to your lordship or to me, I may be pardoned for observing that our interview need last no longer."

And once more rising from her seat, Miss Trelawney advanced towards the bell-pull.

"No—do not order me from your presence!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "Spare me that indignity at least."

"Or rather, let your lordship spare me the necessity of submitting you to it," said Venetia, in a tone of dignified calmness.

"Will you not hear me for one minute longer?" cried the Earl, evidently labouring under the strongest excitement: then, without waiting for a response, he proceeded to observe in a hurried manner, "It is not in the power of mortal to subdue his feelings at all times—and you should rather pity than blame me! The generous warrior when triumphing over a vanquished foe, uses his victory with moderation and tempers the pride of his conquest with mercy. Behold me, then, subdued—defeated—overcome by the brilliancy of your beauty: and surely, surely you will not spurn me from you?"

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon sank upon his knees in the presence of that lady of dazzling loveliness.

The flush of triumph swept across her magnificent countenance—the gratification of woman's loftiest vanity wreathed her lips into a smile for a single moment—and for a moment also did the same feeling flash from beneath her darkly fringed eye-lids. But this display of emotion was so transitory that the next instant, when it had passed away, the Earl was still left in a sort of pleasing painful doubt as to whether Venetia had thus been really moved at all by that sentiment which constituted the weakness of her sex, or whether it were a mere illusion on his part.

"Behold me at your feet, angelic woman!" he exclaimed, his upturned countenance expressing the fond ardour of his rapturous devotion and earnest hope even more eloquently than the impassioned accents of his voice.

"Rise, my lord—let us resume our seats—and we will discuss the question more rationally and more deliberately," said Miss Trelawney, with such perfect self-possession of manner and calmness of tone that the Earl gazed upon her in mute wonder and bewilderment as he rose from his supplicating posture.

A thousand ideas swept through his imagination all in a moment. Was she really moved by his proceedings?—had his looks, his words, and his conduct touched her heart?—and had she all along intended to yield, after a due amount of charming coquetry, feigned indignation, and artful prudery? Did she consider that the sentimental portion of the drama had gone far enough?—and was she about to bargain methodically relative to the terms on which she would consent to become his mistress? Or had she merely adopted a stratagem in order to induce him to abandon that suppliant position in which she feared that he might perhaps be surprised by some one entering

the room? In fine, was she an intriguing adventuress who had feigned a desperate resistance with a view to enhance the charm, the value, and the excitement of an eventual surrender?—or was she really a woman of virtue and character, summoning all her presence of mind to aid in crushing the arrogant pretensions which he had dared to proffer?

With the more than lightning speed at which thought alone can travel, did these reflections gush through the mind of the Earl as he rose from his knees and fixed his looks in mingled amazement and doubt upon the incomprehensible beauty. She moved towards an arm-chair—and as he followed her with his eyes and dwelt on the swimming voluptuousness of her gait, his impure imagination at once suggested that a being of such glowing beauty and capable of exciting such sensuous rapture in the soul, could not herself be indifferent to love's enjoyment nor inexperienced in its ways. Nurtured in the midst of fashionable profligacy and high-life demoralization, it was not astonishing if the Earl of Curzon at no time entertained a particularly exalted opinion of female virtue;—and on the present occasion his excited feelings and inflamed temperament, aided by his personal vanity and conceit, led him to imagine and to hope that the scene had inspired the lady with sensations akin to those that were thrilling to his own heart's core.

She seated herself in the arm-chair;—and the moment that her countenance was again turned towards the Earl, his eyes greedily and searchingly sought to read in her looks whether there was really a covert levity in her manner and a subdued wantonness in her breast. But as if she penetrated his design and scorned the imputation which it conveyed, her features again assumed that look of sovereign hauteur which they had ere now put on and which had been so successfully practised in the mirror before the Earl's arrival.

"Be seated, my lord," she said, pointing with a queen-like imperiousness of gesture towards a chair at some distance from that which she had just taken.

"You are a judge—about to pronounce my doom," exclaimed the nobleman, as he retreated to the chair which she thus indicated. "But I implore you to have mercy upon one whom your charms have bound captive, and whom your decision will either elevate to elysian happiness or plunge into the darkest despair."

"A truce to this extravagant poetising, my lord," said Venetia, in a cold voice and with a dignified look. "You have already indulged in too many meaningless phrases and empty flatteries; and I am not going to answer you in the style of those pretty nothings which gentlemen and ladies toss from one to the other with so much elegant ease in the conversations of fashionable life."

"By all means, Miss Trelawney," said the Earl, "let the discourse become as serious as you will: for when the subject of love is solemnly dealt with, there is every hope for the impassioned lover."

"And your lordship, then, seriously and solemnly avows an affection towards me?" observed Miss Trelawney, with a look as calmly sedate as her question was business-like and pointed.

"On my soul I love you passionately — I adore you!" exclaimed the Earl, placing his right hand upon his breast and once more making a movement as if he were about to rush forward and fall at her feet.

"I accept your answer as a sober avowal and a deliberate affirmative," said Venetia, with an imperious gesture that commanded him to retain his seat: then, with an air of the calmest and fullest self-possession, she observed, "I presume that when your lordship sought my presence just now, instead of delivering the bird to the domestic at the door, it was with the intention of thus honouring me by a proposal of marriage?"

"Marriage!" echoed the Earl, startled by a word the mention of which seemed to imply a terrible misconception on Miss Trelawney's part, and at the same time involved himself in a most awkward dilemma as to the terms in which he must now explain the views and hopes that had all along animated him.

"Yes—marriage, to be sure," said the lady. "Have you not just made me an offer of marriage as intelligibly as words could possibly convey such a proposal?"

"Marriage!" repeated the nobleman, confused and bewildered. "Really, Miss Trelawney — we have been misunderstanding each other——Oh! my dearest Venetia, why tantalise me thus cruelly?" he exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of excitement: "why torture me——"

But he stopped short—amazed, if not positively overawed by the look of grand dignity and sublime indignation which Venetia bent upon him as she slowly rose from her chair.

"Explain your meaning, my lord, when you dared to avow that you loved me!" she said, in a voice admirably befitting that imposing air.

"Is it possible that you did not understand me?" he exclaimed, half in terror that the scene was genuine on her side—and half in hope that it was a mere pleasantry to which she would speedily put an end by dissolving into smiles and sinking into his arms.

"When an honourable man tells a woman of stainless character that he loves her," was Venetia's dignified response, "there can be no misunderstanding as to the meaning of his words."

"But wherefore—Oh! wherefore allude to those trammels which the world denominates *marriage?*" exclaimed the Earl. "Wherefore——"

"Stop, my lord!" said the lady, with another imperious gesture. "Did you intend to proffer marriage to me—yes or no? Spare evasion—avoid subterfuge—and give me a direct reply in a monosyllable."

"Marriage, my dear Venetia ——"

"Your answer, my lord—yes or no?"

"But I must explain ——"

"Your answer, I say! Yes or no?"—and while her countenance flushed with the richest, warmest glow, she stamped her foot impatiently upon the carpet.

"Venetia, you cannot be ignorant of the fact that I am already married," said the Earl,—"but to a woman whom I do not love—whereas I adore and worship you! Oh! be not angry with me——"

"Enough, my lord!" cried the lady abruptly: and her whole form appeared to dilate with the dignity of an offended, outraged woman — but a dignity which rather asserted itself through the medium of a withering scorn than a fiery indigna-

tion, as if conscious of its own sufficiency for all purposes of self-defence. "I knew beforehand that you were married:—but, inasmuch as your importunity was amounting to persecution and surpassing even the limits of a coxcomb's insolence, I resolved to give your lordship a lesson that may perhaps prove salutary. Depart, then—or I will summon my lacqueys to thrust you forth from the dwelling!"

"You are serious, madam?" exclaimed the Earl, affecting to doubt that she was so—but at the same time his countenance was crimsoned with rage, spite, and disappointment.

"Dare not remain to bandy words with me, my lord!" returned Venetia, still preserving the goddess-like dignity of a Juno, so that she lost not her temper for a single moment. "Depart!"—and she extended her superb arm towards the door.

"Then you *are* in earnest!" said Lord Curzon, a fiendish malignity appearing upon that countenance which, naturally so handsome, was for a few moments distorted by this diabolical expression: and as Satan's self seemed to look out of his large dark eyes, from beneath the corrugated brows, he observed in a voice that was hoarse with concentrated passion, "Venetia, you shall repent of this! I have sworn to possess you—and I will keep my vow! Be you guarded by all the angels of heaven, I will invoke all the devils of hell to succour me in carrying out my resolve!"

But while he was yet giving utterance to this threat alike so tremendous and so atrocious, there appeared upon the countenance of Venetia Trelawney that look of proud defiance which she had also practised in the mirror, and which she now assumed for the purpose of convincing her enemy how little she valued his menaced hostility.

"By heaven! your pride shall be humbled, haughty fair one!" ejaculated the Earl of Curzon, furious with rage: and, darting upon her a terrible look, he rushed from the room.

Venetia rang the bell in order that the domestic might be in attendance to open the front door for his lordship: and as the tinkling sound met his ears, it reminded him that no act of cowardice could possibly be more brutal than to precipitate himself down stairs and fling himself out of the house in a manner so little suitable to a lady's dwelling. He accordingly stifled his rage as well as he was able—moderated his pace—and quitted Acacia Cottage in a manner that was not calculated to arouse any strange suspicions in the mind of the serious-looking domestic.

As for Venetia—the instant she heard the front door close behind the Earl of Curzon, she no longer restrained the free vent which her feelings sought;—and throwing herself upon the sofa, she gave way—not to tears, gentle reader—oh! no—but to a peal of laughter so unfeignedly merry that it rang in its musical intonations through the room until the very atmosphere seemed laden with the harmony of that splendid being's mirth.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN TASH AND HIS MAN ROBIN.

As the Earl of Curzon issued forth from the front door of Acacia Cottage, an individual of somewhat different appearance emerged from the portals of a public-house nearly opposite.

The person just mentioned and whom we must pause to introduce to our readers, was a man of about forty—of middle height—and stoutly, though by no means clumsily built. He had dark hair—fierce moustachios—and enormous black whiskers, exceedingly bushy and meeting beneath his chin. His brows were thick and overhanging—his eyes were small, dark, and of a peculiarly bold expression—and his face was of that rubicund complexion which seemed to owe its hue to the influence of the brandy-bottle rather than to the natural ruddiness of a vigorous health.

This personage was dressed in what would now-a-days be called the "shabby-genteel" style. He wore a blue frock-coat buttoned up to the throat, and the stand-up collar of which was fastened by means of hooks and eyes. A black polished leathern stock, over which no collar peeped, seemed purposely intended to sustain the wearer's head in a fixed position—so tight, so high, and so stiff was that article of the gentleman's attire. Not a vestige of linen was to be seen in the shape of wristbands any more than in the form of collar: and it was therefore left to the imagination of the beholder to determine whether the gentleman wore any shirt at all. His trousers were light grey, strapped very tightly over a pair of boots with enormous high heels, to which a pair of immense steel spurs were fastened. His hat was tall and expanded to a remarkable degree in the crown: the brims were large, curled up at the sides, but hanging over considerably both before and behind. He wore a soiled pair of buckskin gloves; and in his right hand he carried a stick with a tolerably large knob, and which looked amazingly as if it were "loaded" after the fashion of a life-preserver—or, in other words, as if that knob, apparently intended for ornament, was in reality filled with lead.

The garments of this gentleman were soiled and thread-bare, although he wore them with an air of as much satisfaction as if they were a brand new suit. But perhaps he fancied that an insolent demeanour, a swaggering gait, and a self-sufficient look, would cover as it were the defects of his raiment and impress people with the idea that he was a person of consequence in spite of the seediness of his wardrobe. He did not however *appear* the bully without being fully prepared on all occasions to justify the character—unless indeed it were that he was no coward, as the generality of bullies notoriously are. In early life he had served in the army, as a subaltern officer, with some credit to himself so far as a desperate and reckless valour was concerned: but his unprincipled conduct as a gamester and spendthrift, had led him into certain transactions so closely bordering upon downright swindling, that he was compelled to leave his regiment. He sold his commission as a lieutenant—became a "man about town"—retained a semi-military style of apparel—dubbed himself "Captain"—and lived upon his wits. By frequenting taverns, billiard-rooms, and night-houses, at the

West End of the town, he scraped acquaintance not only with inexperienced young gentlemen just entering upon life, and whom he was sure to fleece most unmercifully,—but also with many dissipated noblemen who visited those places of resort, and whom the Captain invariably claimed as acquaintances in future. If they were bold enough to give him the "cut direct," he was certain to pick a quarrel with them; and if they even gave him "the cold shoulder," he would find some means of annoying them. They therefore preferred the less disagreeable alternative of bestowing upon him a familiar nod when they encountered him in public; and thus the Captain was enabled to boast of his numerous aristocratic acquaintances.

But the thousand and one devices which he put into practice in order to levy contributions upon his friends, were ingenious and humourous to a degree: and with a view to prevent the possibility of refusal when he thus made his pecuniary demands, he was wont to request a sum so moderate—often-times so ridiculously small—that it was next to impossible for the individual whom he thus pounced upon to parry the attempted exaction with any feasible excuse. By the aid, therefore, of half-a-crown from one, eighteen-pence from another, and a shilling from a third, the Captain contrived to live from hand to mouth and to rub on from day to day—although there were occasional intervals when he was very "hard up" indeed and when he was literally driven to his wits' end.

Such was Captain Rolando Tash—a gentleman whose name was notorious at every tavern, brothel, gaming-table, sponging-house, livery-stable, and place of public resort, in or near London. The King's Bench and Fleet prisons likewise resounded with his fame; and every magistrate in the metropolis had more than once been compelled to fine the Captain for being drunk and disorderly in the street; or to bind him over to keep the peace towards some individual in particular and all his Majesty's subjects in general. In fact, there was not a prominent knocker at the West End which had not been wrenched either partially or wholly off by the Captain's hand at some time or another: there was not a surgeon's bell which had not been violently and alarmingly rung on more occasions than one by this same hilarious Captain, when in his cups;—there was not a barber's pole which he had not shifted from its proper place to some neighbouring establishment which did not require any such emblem at all;—and there was scarcely a street-watchman's head which had not been broken at least once by this same unruly and incorrigible Captain Rolando Tash.

Such was the gentleman who emerged from a tavern in the Knightsbridge Road just at the very moment when the Earl of Curzon issued forth from Acacia Cottage. But the Captain was not alone: indeed, he never was alone. That is to say, he invariably had an attendant following him at a respectful distance,—a sort of Man Friday or Sancho Panza, who shared his fortunes and his misfortunes—his successes and his reverses—and who adhered to him with the staunchest fidelity. In fact, whoever beheld Captain Tash advancing with his usual swagger along the street, might be certain that his man Robin was not very far behind. There was however a great discrepancy between the pretensions, demeanour, and personal appearance of the two worthies: for inasmuch as the Captain invariably looked and walked as if he faucied the street was not half wide enough for him and that everybody ought to make room and touch their hats as he passed, Robin on the contrary was wont to glide along the kerb-stone or creep by the side of the wall with the stealthy pace of a cat. Moreover, Robin was thin, lank, and lean in person—shuffling and shambling in gait—downcast, furtive, and sneaking in looks—retiring and apparently timid in manner. Thus, great as the contrast was between the burly person of the master and the starveling appearance of the man, it was not greater than the difference between the insolent assurance of the former and the unobtrusive air of meekness which characterised the latter.

Robin was not however exactly what he seemed in this respect. Beneath that bashful and timid air, lurked a cunning watchfulness that was ever on the alert to take advantage of any circumstance that might be turned to good account. Keen, shrewd, and penetrating, Robin was always most upon his guard when he appeared most retiring: and when his looks seemed to express naught save a listless vacancy, he was sure to be intent on some object requiring skill, tact, and caution to carry it out. More thoroughly unprincipled than even his master—if that were possible—or at all events, capable of the prompt performance of deeds at the first aspect of which the Captain would pause and deliberate,—Robin was as dangerous as the creeping snake, whereas his employer was like the bull that bellows and makes every one aware of its presence before it has time to do a mischief.

The man Robin was pretty nigh the same age as his master, in whose service he had been for about a dozen years at the period when we thus introduce them to our readers. To the Captain he was devotedly attached; and although circumstances had placed them rather on the footing of companions and friends, than of employer and servant, yet Robin invariably treated Tash with the utmost deference and respect. In fact, the tie which bound the sneaking, hypocritical, unprincipled Robin to the overbearing, insolent, and arrogant bully, was one of those mysterious phases in the human character which can only be accounted for by the belief that even the worst and vilest of our species must have somebody or something to love and care for.

Not that the Captain was unkind to his man: on the contrary, he treated him with as much consideration as it was in his nature to bestow—and for any one to offend Robin, was to provoke the certain displeasure of his master. On the other hand, Robin would have died rather than prove unfaithful to the Captain: and though he would have sold his own brother, if he had one, to the gibbet—or would have plucked an angel of his wings if the plumage were of any service to him,—yet was he incapable of injuring a hair of his master's head.

Such was the singular character of this man. His name was properly Robert Shanks; but he was always known as plain "Robin"—and so unaccustomed was he to be addressed by his surname, that it was a wonder he did not forget it altogether. His apparel consisted of a seedy suit of black; and as he wore a white cravat, his appearance was as much that of a decayed itinerant preacher as of a valet out-of-livery to a gentleman in straightened circumstances.

On issuing forth from Acacia Cottage, the Earl of Curzon looked up and down the road in search of a hackney coach to take him home or whithersoever he meant to proceed,—when he was suddenly accosted by Captain Tash.

"How are you, my lord?" exclaimed the individual, performing a military salute with his stick. "Your lordship looks annoyed——"

"Not at all," said the Earl, abruptly. "Good afternoon, Captain—I am in a hurry:"—and the nobleman hastened on in the direction towards the West End.

"Beg pardon, my lord," observed Captain Tash, instantaneously overtaking the Earl, whom he grasped by the arm: "but your lordship——"

"Well, what is it?" demanded the nobleman, impatiently. "I told you that I was in a hurry——"

"And I shan't detain you a moment," said the Captain: then lowering his voice to a whisper and assuming a most mysterious look, he observed, "There's a poor apple-woman round the corner yonder, who's stall has been thrown down by some mischievous young rascal—by gad! it's true, my lord!—and the poor old wretch is whimpering enough to break her own heart and make mine bleed with compassion. But as the devil would have it, I came out this morning in such a hurry—to breakfast with a certain noble friend, in fact—that I left my purse at home——"

"And so you want some silver—eh?" cried the Earl, with angry impatience—for he was in no humour to endure one of the Captain's stories on the present occasion.

"Just eighteen-pence—neither less nor more!" said Tash. "That sum will enable me to make the Italian image-boy quite happy."

"I thought it was a fruit-woman?" observed the nobleman, now scarcely able to repress a smile at the contradiction into which the gallant Captain had inadvertently fallen.

"To be sure!" exclaimed the latter, altogether unabashed: "it *is* a fruit-woman—a poor creature with a wooden leg——"

"By the way," interrupted the Earl, as a sudden thought struck him, "I think you can do me a service, Captain; and instead of eighteen-pence, I may perchance be enabled to put as many pounds into your pocket."

"Make use of me as you will, my lord," exclaimed Tash, his rubicund countenance brightening up to such a degree that it seemed as if it were on the point of blazing with spontaneous combustion.

"Step aside with me," said the Earl, drawing the Captain beyond the view of Venetia's windows: then stopping short, he asked, "Did you observe the house which I have just left?"

"To be sure—Acacia Cottage," replied Tash.

"But do you know who lives there?" demanded the Earl.

"I can't say that I am acquainted with her name, my lord," was the response: "but as I was drinking all yesterday at the tavern opposite, I saw a beautiful lady once or twice at the windows; and I was told she was the mistress of the Cottage. But I did not think of inquiring her name——"

"It is Venetia Trelawney" said the Earl. "And now, the service which I need at your hands may be explained in a few minutes. But where is Robin?"

"There!" answered the Captain, pointing with his stick towards a shop that was closed, and in the door-way of which his man was half-concealed, just as a person stands up to avoid a shower of rain—although on the present occasion the weather was gloriously fine.

"I think Robin is the very person to assist in carrying out my views," continued the Earl of Curzon.

"And those views?" said Captain Tash, inquiringly.

"Are to watch all the acts, movements, and proceedings of Miss Trelawney," returned the nobleman.

"It shall be done," exclaimed Tash. "If she only kills a fly upon her window-ledge, the deed shall be duly reported to your lordship."

"Well, you may be as minute as you will in espying all her actions and making notes of them," proceeded the Earl. "Watch every one who visits her house, and write down a description of them if you cannot glean who they are: observe when they call—how long they remain—and let Robin follow them to discover where they live. Then, let Venetia herself be followed every time she goes out——"

"Robin is the fellow for this part of the business," interrupted Captain Tash, as he glanced complacently across the road towards the spot where his faithful dependant was still squeezing himself into the angle of the door-way. "Your lordship may depend upon it that Miss Trelawney shall never budge an inch without having Robin gliding after her. By day and night—in her carriage or on foot—fine weather or foul—no matter what the circumstances are, the lady shall be watched as thoroughly, as completely, and as unerringly as if she was under the supervision of the Bow Street runners."

"I perceive that you understand me," said the Earl, a smile of satisfaction appearing upon his countenance. "In fact, the most trivial particulars relative to Miss Trelawney will prove of importance and value to me. There is a lady living with her, named Mrs. Arbuthnot: and she also must be watched. If you and Robin cannot manage all this between you," continued the Earl, "do not hesitate to enlist the services of some discreet and trusty individual——"

"Depend upon it, my lord," exclaimed Tash, "that I and Robin will prove adequate to the task. Why, Robin is ubiquitous:—he is here—there—and everwhere, all in the same moment. Nothing can escape his watchful eye: if any living being can see through a brick wall, he's the fellow. Another advantage is, that the landlord of the *Green Dragon*, opposite Acacia Cottage, is a friend of mine—I mean to say, a person that I know: and he will render me all possible assistance. Concealed up in one of his front rooms, I shall keep an incessant look out—while Robin does the same; and all Miss Trelawney's proceedings shall be as well known to your lordship, as if you lived in Acacia Cottage and saw with your own eyes everything that was going on."

"I shall rely upon you," said the Earl. "And now take these ten guineas on account," he added, placing the sum named in the Captain's hand.

"Your lordship's business is now my own, as completely as if my life depended upon the issue," observed Tash.

They then separated—the nobleman proceeding towards the West End, and the Captain returning to the public-house, into which he was immediately followed by his man Robin.

CHAPTER V.

BLIND MAN'S BUFF.

At the charming village of Richmond, which, as most of our readers are aware, is about nine miles to the westward of London, there stood a handsome house, in the occupation of a widow lady named Owen. She had resided there some time—kept her carriage—was visited by all the neighbouring families of distinction—and occasionally gave splendid entertainments, at which however the principal attractions were decidedly her own four lovely daughters.

The names of these young ladies were respectively Agatha, Emma, Julia, and Mary: the eldest was about twenty-two—the youngest sixteen;—and they were all in the same style of beauty. Their hazel eyes shone with an eloquent vivacity—their dark brown hair was usually worn in flowing ringlets—and their animated countenances breathed voluptuousness and soft desires. The tallest of them was not above the middle height of women: but their forms were all modelled to an admirable symmetry—the light shape and supple movements of each charming girl producing the mingled effect of brilliancy and grace. They usually dressed pretty nearly alike: and at Richmond they were denominated the Four Goddesses.

But lovely as they were, it did not appear that even the eldest, although two-and-twenty years of age, had received any eligible offer of marriage: and this most probably arose from the fact of its being whispered that the Princes of the Royal Family were very intimate at the house. Not that scandal had gone so far as to sully the fame of the young ladies by any positive or specific assertion: but still it was known that the Prince Regent and his brothers, the Dukes of York and Cumberland, *did* visit Mrs. Owen in a private manner;—and although the girls were envied, caressed, and petted by their fashionable acquaintances all the more on this account, young gentlemen were nevertheless rather shy of seeking their hands in marriage.

This circumstance did not however seem to trouble the minds or interfere with the happiness of Agatha, Emma, Julia, and Mary. They were light-hearted, joyous, good-tempered girls; and their pleasing manners, sprightly conversation, and elegant accomplishments rendered them universal favourites. They never wanted partners in the dance—the handsomest and gayest gallants eagerly pressing forward to ensure their hands for a quadrille, however backward these suitors might be in requesting those self-same hands in marriage.

Mrs. Owen was a lady who did the honours of her dinner-table or ball-room to the utmost perfection. She dressed with splendour, but with good taste: and now, in the glorious *embonpoint* of forty-five and with the remains of a beauty that must have been truly splendid in her earlier years, she was still a remarkably fine woman. She had been a widow, it was believed, for a long time: but what her husband was when alive, did not seem to be generally known.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening—and the four young ladies were assembled in the drawing-room of their abode at Richmond. Mrs. Owen was in another apartment—or to tell the truth, in the housekeeper's room, superintending the arrangements for a very choice little supper that was to be given at ten precisely. Her daughters were all dressed with the most perfect elegance—although, in compliance with the fashion of the day, their white shoulders were left completely nude and their fair bosoms so much exposed that little remained for the imagination in order to fill up the picture of each glowing bust.

The time-piece upon the mantel in the drawing-room had struck eight, we say,—when a plain carriage and pair drove up to the house; and the Prince of Wales alighted, followed immediately by the Marquis of Leveson. They were at once ushered into the mansion—and the carriage was taken round to the stables.

But however privately and unostentatiously this royal visit was paid to the Owens, the arrival of the Prince Regent and his veteran companion was duly observed by an ill-looking man who stood concealed behind a clump of trees at a short distance.

This individual, whose age might have been somewhere betwixt thirty and forty, was short, thin, and excessively pale: and the ghastly aspect of his face was enhanced by the lank black hair that appeared below the slouching brims of a battered hat, and also by the dark eyes that shone like burning coals in the deep sallow hollows in which they were set. He wore a shabby shooting-jacket—corduroy breeches—leathern gaiters—and a heavy pair of lace-up boots. A cotton handkerchief was tied loosely round his neck;—his shirt was not particularly clean;—and altogether there was an air of such determined ruffianism and desperate villany about this individual, that no traveller, however brave, would relish meeting him in a lonely place.

From the clump of trees where he had concealed himself, he observed the arrival of the Prince Regent: but when he saw that his Royal Highness was accompanied by the Marquis of Leveson, he gave vent to a bitter imprecation expressive of annoyance. He however remained in ambush, with his keen eyes fixed upon a path-way leading round to the back door of Mrs. Owen's house.

In a few minutes a livery-servant came hurrying along from that direction with stealthy steps and looks cast furtively around, as if he were fearful of being observed: and, approaching the trees, he in a few moments joined the ruffian who was already concealed in ambush there.

"Well, Dan'el," said the livery-servant, "you see he's come?"

"Yes—but who the devil's that old buck along with him?" demanded the fellow, in a harsh voice the natural intonation of which was savage and even ferocious to a degree.

"It's only the Marquis of Leveson—one of the Prince's pals," replied the livery-servant.

"But you know, John," rejoined the ruffian, "that we haven't calculated upon there being *two* to deal with. We thought, from what you said, the Prince was sure to come alone ——"

"Well, Dan'el, and how the deuce could I foresee that his Royal Highness would bring the old Marquis?" interrupted the servant. "From what I gleaned from the young ladies' tiring-maid, the Prince only was expected: but as the Marquis is likewise intimate at the house, it isn't very astonishing that he should have borne his royal pal company. And, after all, won't it be a more lucrative affair?"

"Yes—but not so easy to manage, p'r'aps," observed the ruffian, in a musing tone.

"Why not? Haven't you got all the chaps in readiness?" asked John the domestic: "and are you afeard that an old buffer like Lord Leveson can make any effectual resistance?"

"No—not that," responded the man, whose Christian name appeared to be Daniel. "But the matter as it now stands looks more dangerous to venture upon. The Prince wouldn't peach, you know: he'd comply with every demand—and hold his tongue. Because, if he did kick up a row—make the thing public—and set the Bow Street runners at work, he would be forced to tell all the circumstances,—how he came down incog. to visit Mrs. Owen and the young ladies—and so forth: and this he would not do, out of consideration for the young ladies themselves. But with the Marquis it's quite different: because there 's nothing strange in a nobleman of his rank visiting a genteel family like the Owens—and therefore he might safely give information of all that happens, without fear of compromising the honour of the young ladies. Don't you see the force of these arguments?"

"I'll knock down all your reasoning in a moment, Hangman," said the livery-servant: "for, don't you see that according to your own showing the Prince will have every reason to hush the matter up for the sake of the ladies?—and therefore he'll put a seal upon the lips of Lord Leveson—because his lordship could not possibly give publicity to the affair without admitting that the Prince was in his company at the time. Do you see that, Dan'el the Hangman?" asked the servant, in a chuckling tone of coarse familiarity.

"Well, I must say that you've put the thing in the right point of view," observed the ruffian: "and therefore, as I'm a man who soon makes up his mind, I say without farther hesitation that the thing shall be done. I suppose they'll leave about midnight?"

"That's the hour the carriage is ordered for—and supper is to be served up at ten precisely," responded the footman. "So there's no doubt that the Prince and Leveson will be jogging soon after midnight?"

"Good!" returned the Hangman. "By the gibbet and halter! there'll be a rum game up before the sun rises again!"

"I hope so," said John the footman. "But I must hasten back now—for fear of being missed. Good night, Dan'el: I wish you luck, old fellow."

"There's no fear of that," rejoined the Hangman.

They then separated—the livery-servant retracing his steps stealthily towards the back entrance into the house, and the Hangman striking rapidly across the adjacent fields.

Meantime the Prince Regent and the Marquis of Leveson had joined the young ladies in the drawing-room of the mansion; and a sprightly conversation had speedily sprung up.

His Royal Highness was seated on a sofa between the eldest Miss Owen and Emma: while Julia and Mary became the more special objects of Lord Leveson's attentions. Mrs. Owen still remained absent from the room—and apparently her society was not much missed.

"I understand you have been very gay latterly, young ladies," said the Prince Regent, after a brief pause in the conversation. "Balls and dinner-parties at home—dances and soirees abroad—pic-nics in the park—water excursions——"

"Oh! everything charming, I can assure you!" exclaimed Miss Agatha, her pearly teeth revealed by the smile that parted her ripe, red, sensual lips. "But I can assure you, sir, that we missed you very much."

"You deceitful little puss," cried the Prince, throwing his arm round her neck and imprinting a kiss upon each warm and flushing cheek—and then another and another still upon her moist lips;—"I do not believe that you are sincere!"

"But I will guarantee Agatha's sincerity, by the experience of my own feelings," said Emma: then, as the Prince endeavoured to catch her likewise in his arms, she bounded from the sofa and darted away, making the room ring with her merry laugh.

The Prince hastened after her: and when she had led him a dance round the table, and from one end of the room to the other, she suffered herself to be driven up into a corner, where she was compelled to yield her lips, as ripe and as luscious as those of her elder sister, to the reiterated caresses of his Royal Highness.

"Oh! what fun a game of blind-man's buff would be!" ejaculated Miss Julia, starting from her seat, and thus escaping the toyings which the Marquis of Leveson was just beginning to bestow upon her.

"And let the Prince be blindfolded!" exclaimed Mary, now disengaging herself in her turn from the arm which the old nobleman threw around her bare neck: then running up to his Royal Highness, she took both his hands, crying with childish delight, "Will you play, sir?"

"To be sure I will!" said the Prince Regent, as he absolutely lifted the young lady up in his arms and covered her with kisses—despite of her fighting and struggling, which she however accompanied with the heartiest laughter: so that it was easy to perceive she was very far from being offended.

"Now — let me blindfold you, sir!" exclaimed Julia, approaching the Prince with a bandage, the instant her youngest sister had succeeded in escaping from his arms.

"With all my heart!" he cried. "But first——"

And catching her in his embrace, he culled the sweets of her lips as he had done with regard to her three sisters.

"Now are you satisfied?" she asked, as with glowing cheeks and smiling looks she disengaged herself from his arms: then, having hastily arranged her hair, she said, "Come, be gentle—and submit to be bandaged like a good boy."

"I will," returned the Prince, seating himself in a chair, while Miss Julia adjusted and fastened the bandage with her beautiful white hands, which the royal voluptuary kissed every time they touched his face.

"Now you may begin, sir!" she cried, darting away and clapping her hands gleefully: and the merry laugh of the four sisters rang like silver bells through the apartment.

"I have got a partial head-ache and cannot stand this amusement," said the Marquis of Leveson—but in the most perfect good-humour: and, quitting the room, he hastened to join Mrs. Owen, whom he ascertained, upon inquiry of a domestic, to be in the housekeeper's apartment.

It appeared that his lordship was a privileged person—and he was therefore received by Mrs. Owen

with a cordial, or indeed familiar welcome, although she was busily engaged in superintending the manufacture of whip-syllabubs and ice-creams.

Leaving the Marquis in company with the lady of the house, we must return to the drawing-room, where the utmost hilarity now prevailed. The Prince, entering into the spirit of the game as fully as if he were only a great school-boy in his teens, exerted himself to add to the merriment of these romping girls. To speak the truth, he was by no means anxious to catch any one of them and thereby divest himself of the office of Blind Man: he therefore allowed them to escape one after another, as often as they fell into his grasp. But before he thus released the captive damsel of the moment, he indemnified himself for his generosity towards the prisoner, by a fresh banquet upon the sweets of her lips.

The scene was really charming and exhilarating to a degree; and the Prince enjoyed it most unfeignedly. There he was, feeling his way about the drawing-room—careful not to overturn the table, upset a flower-stand, or smash a China vase,—while the romps bounded and frisked in all directions, leaping upon sofas and over chairs, and making the place ring with their musical voices and merry laughter. Now the Prince's extended hands came in contact with a muslin dress—then they glided over the polished surface of a glowing bosom: now they swept along a naked arm smooth as alabaster, but warm to the touch—then they were laid upon a shoulder smooth as velvet but plump in its natural softness: now his fingers became entangled for a moment in tresses of silken fineness—next his arms suddenly enfolded a waist of wasp-like symmetry—and then his lips were fastened upon flushing cheeks and a delicious mouth, while a bosom, palpitating with the excitement of the game and perhaps with other and more tender emotions, heaved and fell rapidly against his breast. But the fair one thus caught, would eventually succeed in escaping from the Prince's arms: and thus

the game went on and on—each sister in her turn being captured, and then breaking loose to be presently made a captive once more.

At length his Royal Highness was compelled to abandon the sport through sheer exhaustion: and tearing off the bandage, he flung himself upon a sofa—laughing so heartily that it appeared as if his portly sides must burst. Then the young ladies, likewise participating the merriment with their voices which sounded sweet as strings of musical pearls, threw themselves one upon a sofa—another on an ottoman—a third on a chair—and the fourth on a footstool—to arrange their disordered dress and smooth their dishevelled hair. It seemed as if the inmates of a seraglio had been suddenly thrown into the most delightful confusion by the entrance of some stranger of the male sex, and as if each fair odalisque were in haste to conceal the charms which had been listlessly exposed in the fancied security that was thus so unexpectedly violated.

But was all this had just taken place a mere innocent romping on the part of these four sisters?—and was there a perfect guiltlessness of any immoral intent in the somewhat wild license to which the rein had been given? We are at present as much puzzled and bewildered on that score as our readers can possibly be; but we are bound to confess that if those lovely girls meant and thought no wrong, yet the ardour of the caresses and the nature of the toyings in which they had suffered the Prince to indulge, were sufficient to inflame all the nascent passions the fires of which assuredly beamed already in their eyes.

By the time the hair was re-arranged in luxuriant tresses and the disordered apparel restored to its previous state, the young ladies began to reflect that the supper-hour must be near at hand: and scarcely had they consulted the clock on the mantel-piece, when John the livery-servant entered to make the expected announcement. The Prince and his fair young friends accordingly proceeded to the apartment where the exquisite supper was served up, and where Mrs. Owen and the Marquis of Leveson were awaiting their presence.

The lady of the house and his Royal Highness met each other with the courteous familiarity of old friends; and it became evident here, as well as in the drawing-room up-stairs, that the Regent laid aside his princely rank altogether when on a visit to Mrs Owen and her bevy of charming daughters. But although he took his place at the board and behaved himself throughout the repast with that easy and polished familiarity which as a gentleman he was so well able to exercise, and which seemed in itself a tacit recognition of the perfect equality on which all were assembled for the time being,—he never once, by either a flippant word or a libertine act, made a breach in the propriety of conduct that prevailed during the banquet.

There was, however, plenty of laughing—plenty of mirth and good humour;—the champagne circulated pretty freely, adding brilliancy to the wit of the discourse and sparkling lustre to the eyes of the young ladies.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DESPERADOES.

At midnight precisely the Prince Regent's carriage drove round from the stable-yard to the front of the mansion; and his Royal Highness immediately came forth and entered the vehicle. The Marquis of Leveson followed: the steps were put up—the door was closed—the footman ascended to his place on the box by the side of the coachman—and the equipage rolled rapidly away towards Kew.

The night was dark and the heavens were somewhat menacing: but there was a strong breeze which kept off the rain—and the brilliant lamps of the carriage lighted the road that it was pursuing. The pair of horses sped along at a gallant pace;—and inside the vehicle the Prince and the Marquis of Leveson chatted gaily concerning the entertainment experienced at the mansion which they had just quitted. From this topic their discourse insensibly turned upon the love-campaign which had been settled a few days previously with regard to Venetia Trelawney;—and the Prince Regent was observing that he should like to know how the Earl of Curzon had got on in that respect during the day which was just passed,—when both he and Lord Leveson were alarmed by a sudden noise, like the rush of several men from the hedges skirting the road.

"Perdition!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, as he let down the glass on his side, while the Marquis did the same on the other.

But before either of them had time to look out and ascertain what was the matter, the carriage came to a full stop—and the horses began to plunge violently. A commanding voice exclaimed, "Cut the traces!"—and at the same moment a scuffle was heard upon the box, while a masked countenance appeared at each of the windows.

"Villains! do you know who I am?" cried the Prince, furious with rage.

"Silence!—or I'll send a bullet through your head!" exclaimed the individual at the window next to his Royal Highness; and at the same time a pistol was protruded into the carriage.

"But I am the Prince Regent!" said George, thinking that this announcement would have the effect of overawing the ruffians.

"We know it," observed the man who had already spoken. "Silence—and no harm will happen!"

The Prince threw himself sullenly back in the carriage, not deigning to bestow another word upon persons whom he took to be highwaymen; while the Marquis of Leveson, who had also been regaled with the unmistakable view of a pistol-barrel on *his* side of the vehicle, thought it prudent not to venture upon any remark at all in the presence of such desperate characters.

All that had hitherto occurred, and which has taken us some minutes to relate, was really comprised in the space of comparatively a few seconds: and in the interval the traces were cut—the horses had ceased from plunging—the coachman and footman were overpowered by the ruffians who had scaled the box—and the whole equipage was therefore in the hands of the desperadoes, whoever they might be.

The conquest was therefore prompt and easy—the blow was struck with a suddenness and a resolution that defied resistance—and as the scene took place in the most lonely part of the road between Richmond and Kew, all clamour for help would have proved unavailing. Besides, the Prince's servants were unarmed, the bare possibility of such an outrage being undreamt of, and consequently unprovided for: and moreover, the desperadoes were eight in number.

It may be added, ere we pursue the thread of the

adventure, that the instant the party had burst forth from the hedges,—half emerging from one side of the road, and the remainder from the other,—two of them had seized the horses' heads—four had clambered up on the box to secure the coachman and valet,—and the other two had guarded the windows of the vehicle in the manner already described. There was consequently so much method in the whole proceeding, and the blow was struck with such promptitude and such a complete absence of anything bordering on hesitation or confusion, that all the details of the affair had been evidently pre-arranged. The men wore crape masks over their countenances: each one was well armed;—and the individual who had given the order to cut the traces, appeared to be the chief of the gang.

But to resume the details of the narrative. Immediately on the royal equipage thus falling into the power of the desperadoes, the coachman and valet, with their hands bound, were thrust inside the vehicle, the leader of the masked band entering it also.

"I beg your Royal Highness's pardon," said this individual, "for placing these menials in your company, and also for obtruding myself upon your presence. But certain little precautions are necessary: and these of which I have just spoken are amongst them. Another is to draw up the wooden blinds of the vehicle," he added, suiting the action to the word. "But pray don't let any of you entertain so foolish an idea as to offer resistance or think of overpowering me: because I hold the check-string in one hand—and a loaded pistol in the other. The string, if pulled, would instantaneously convey the alarm to my comrades, who are seated upon the box; and the pistol shall be discharged without hesitation or remorse if a hostile finger be laid upon me."

Thus spoke the leader of the band: and though there was a sort of free-and-easy familiarity in his tone and manner of delivery, it was rather the off-handed expression of confidence in his proceedings and certainty in his power to carry them out, than the jaunty insolence of a vulgar braggart. Indeed, there was a refined correctness in his language and a gentility in his pronunciation which showed that he had been well educated and that his position in life could not always have been an inferior or degrading one, whatever it was now.

By drawing up the blinds, he plunged the interior of the carriage into the most pitchy blackness: and he was therefore unable to observe the effect which his speech had produced upon the Regent and the Marquis. But as no reply was vouchsafed, and as each remained motionless in his seat, the desperado naturally concluded that his warnings and menaces had not failed to make the desired impression.

Meantime, his men were not inactive in the road. By the aid of some cord, the traces were repaired and the horses once more attached to the vehicle, the bright lamps of which were put out. Two of the fellows mounted the box—one of them undertaking the functions of coachman;—and the equipage drove rapidly on.

But what became of the other five desperadoes? They had horses concealed in a thicket close at hand: and mounting their steeds, they followed the carriage at a short distance. That they should not however attract the special notice and arouse the suspicions of any other travellers whom they might happen to meet, they parted company to a certain extent, by falling into the rear of one another and thus riding along singly, but with short intervals between them. But in a few minutes the whole procession turned into a bye-road, where there was less necessity to adopt so much precaution.

By a sudden turn to the right which the carriage thus took, instead of proceeding straight forward as it ought to have done if it had continued in the direction of Kew, the captives inside were enabled to judge that they had diverged from the main road.

"Will you explain the object of this outrage, and the extent to which it is likely to reach?" demanded the Prince, now thinking it high time to make some inquiries of the sort, and indeed feeling himself unable to subdue any longer the alarms which were rapidly gaining upon him.

"Your Royal Highness need apprehend no personal ill-treatment," replied the leader of the gang: "but beyond this assurance I can say nothing more at present."

The Prince was about to give utterance to some threat: but remembering how powerless he was at the moment, and reflecting that the band probably consisted of the most desperate ruffians, who would as soon slit the wind-pipe of a Regent as of the humblest individual, he smothered his rage and resentment so far as to hold his peace.

A solemn silence accordingly prevailed inside the carriage, which continued to roll on at a rapid pace: but as to the direction it was now taking, this was a point that utterly baffled all conjecture. At the expiration of about half-an-hour it stopped: then followed a noise, as of massive gates unfolding upon their creaking hinges;—and the vehicle moved again, but only to turn into some place which, by the echoes raised, appeared to be the entrance to the paved court or stable yard of a mansion. The instant the carriage had thus reached its destination, attended by all the mounted desperadoes, the huge gates were closed again.

The door of the vehicle was now opened—and while the leader of the band retained his seat inside, he bade the prisoners descend. The Prince went first—the Marquis stepped out next—the coachman and valet followed—and then the masked chieftain of the desperadoes brought up the rear. The place was involved in pitchy darkness, unrelieved by even the faintest glimmer: but a door was almost immediately thrown open within a couple of yards of the spot where the party had alighted—and a lantern standing upon the floor just inside the threshold, revealed the interior of an apartment wrapped in funereal gloom.

An ejaculation of alarm fell from the lips of the Prince Regent; and a cry of dismay burst from the tongue of the Marquis of Lorsom—while the two domestics were themselves not less terrified than their royal master and his noble friend. But the commanding voice of the chief bade them proceed: and the peremptory sternness of his tone producing a sort of galvanic effect, the prisoners at once passed into the room the appearance of which was indeed sufficiently sombre to strike terror to their souls. For it was completely hung around with black drapery—and the floor was covered with the same sable cloth. If there were any windows, they were not visible—the dark surface of the funereal hangings being uniform on all the four walls and unbroken by any casement, fire-place, or mantel. Indeed, the instant the Prince, the Marquis, the two servants, and the leader of the gang had entered this place, the very door itself which had admitted them disappeared. That is to

say, upon being shut, a curtain of sable drapery fell upon it: and thus, let the eyes turn whichever way they would, they were met by a wall of unvaried funeral blackness. The ceiling alone was white!

The haughty character of the Prince, which had already been so far shaken as to give vent to an ejaculation of alarm when his looks were first plunged into this chamber of funereal gloom,—that haughty character, we say, now well nigh lost all its firmness and its dignity, when he found himself thus entombed as it were in that sable sepulchre. The dim light of the lantern was but just sufficient to make the darkness visible, and to show that the furniture of the place consisted of only a table and half-a-dozen chairs, all covered with black cloth.

The Marquis of Leveson was even more troubled than the Prince Regent by the awe-inspiring aspect of this place, and the dark though vague and undefined terrors which it was so well calculated to conjure up. As for the royal coachman and valet—*they* were desperately alarmed likewise: for the object of the present proceeding appeared to defy all conjecture. If the desperadoes were mere highwaymen, they would have done their business at once in the middle of the road where they first stopped the carriage. But, if not robbers, who were they?—and what could they be? Whither had they brought their prisoners?—and what meant this apartment hung in black and looking like the abode of Death itself?

These queries not only suggested themselves to the two servants, but also to their royal master and his noble friend Leveson: but as we just now observed, they defied all possibility of solution by the mere means of unaided conjecture.

The eyes of the four prisoners therefore settled with looks of anxious inquiry upon the desperado-leader, who had accompanied them into the room, and who was gazing upon them from behind the crape mask which he still retained over his countenance. He was a tall man—somewhat stoutly built—and dressed in a plain suit of black. He wore a travelling cap, which was pulled so far down over his head as entirely to conceal his hair: and as his features were likewise covered, it was impossible to form the faintest idea of his age. The appearance of his figure—his gait—his attitudes—and his gestures, all however seemed to confirm the impression previously made by the grammatical precision of his language and the inflections of his voice—namely, that he was a man who must have at one time occupied a good position in life, however deeply crime or misfortune (or perhaps both) had since degraded him from that standard.

"Now, sir," said the Prince of Wales, "are we to be informed of the object of this outrage which you have practised upon us?"

"Harsh words will not amend matters," observed the chief; "and you may as well speak civilly to one who holds you as utterly and as completely in his power as if he were a gaoler and this house a prison. But your Royal Highness will presently accompany me to another room—while the Marquis of Leveson and these two domestics remain here to await your return."

"And what guarantee have I that no mishief is intended me?" demanded the Prince, not relishing the prospect of being separated from his friend and his servants.

"The same guarantee which prevents me from blowing out your brains at this moment, if I felt so disposed," replied the leader coolly; and as he spoke, he produced a pistol from each pocket. "But if I meant to take your Royal Highness's life," he added, returning the weapons to their places of concealment about his person, "I could have done it easily and conveniently enough in the high road, without the trouble of bringing you hither in the first instance."

"True!" murmured the Prince in a musing tone: then summoning all his courage and all his dignity to his aid, he said, "I am ready to accompany you."

"In a moment, sir," replied the leader: and turning towards the Marquis of Leveson, he said, "My lord, you will be so kind as to sit tranquilly here until my return. These servants will do the same. If any of you attempt to discover the doors leading hence, it will only be inviting the summary vengeance of those who are keeping guard upon this place, and who are not the less vigilant because unseen by you."

Having thus spoken, the mysterious individual took up the lantern, and drew aside a portion of the drapery at the end of the room.

"Proceed, sir," he said to the Prince, who immediately obeyed: and the masked deparado followed, closing the drapery again behind him.

Lord Leveson and the two servants accordingly remained in the black chamber, which was now plunged into a darkness as deep as the sable hangings that surrounded its walls.

For a few moments the sounds of retreating footsteps—but faint and light, as if treading upon a carpet—met their ears: and then all was still. An Egyptian darkness and a stupendous silence entombed them!

In the meantime the Prince Regent, on issuing from the sable chamber, found himself at the foot of a wide staircase, which was also covered with black drapery. Yes—every feature of the place was clothed in this ominous gloom,—the steps, the balustrades, and the very walls! It was enough to make the flesh creep upon the bones and chill the marrow within them, to be thus surrounded by the unchanging livery of death!

"Come quickly, sir," said the masked leader, hastening up the stairs with the lantern, the dim light of which only made the gloom apparent without mitigating its awe-inspiring effect.

"What on earth is the meaning of all this?" demanded the Prince, unable to restrain another ebullition of mingled alarm and petulance. "Have you brought me hither to be present at a funeral?"

"It is useless to question *me*," was the laconic answer, but delivered with a stress upon the pronoun which instantaneously struck the Prince, and caused the idea to flash to his mind that he was about to be shown into the presence of the real instigator of the outrage whereof his masked guide was perhaps after all only one of the instruments.

While he was still pondering upon this thought, and revolving a thousand conjectures in his mind as to the author of the adventure and its motive, the Prince reached a spacious landing, the floor and walls of which were hung in the same ominous drapery as elsewhere.

"Pass behind this curtain," said the mysterious guide, drawing back a portion of the sable hangings.

The Prince did as he was directed—for he saw no use in remonstrating or resisting: and he was moreover anxious to reach the end of the adventure with

all possible despatch. He accordingly passed behind the drapery, and found himself in the recess of a door-way. His masked companion let the curtain fall again, he himself remaining outside on the landing.

"Now open the door—and enter boldly!" he exclaimed, in a voice of assurance and encouragement.

The Prince Regent unhesitatingly followed this recommendation: the door yielded to his touch—he flung it open—a blaze of light burst upon his vision—and he found himself in a splendid apartment, where a lady of ravishing beauty was reclining upon a sofa.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LADY IN THE GOSSAMER DRESS.

We must pause to describe this splendid creature, whose loveliness burst upon the Prince Regent with an effect that in a moment chased from his memory all the disagreeable portions of an adventure which had thus assumed at length so delightful a phase.

She appeared to be dressed in a kind of oriental costume,—if indeed that garment could be denominated a dress which was made of so gauzy a material as to be almost transparent,—indeed, so diaphanous that although in reality of the purest white, it took a roseate tint from the flesh that showed through. Down to the waist, at all events, this was the effect of a garment which, scarcely thicker than a veil, veiled not the charms of which it formed the only covering; for neither corset nor linen intervened betwixt the lady's glowing bust and that semi-transparent raiment of silken gossamer.

Through this singular dress, therefore, the outlines of all the upper part of her form could be distinguished and traced as easily as the eye of a concealed observer may feast upon the beauties of a nymph bathing in a crystal stream, though plunged to the neck in the pellucid water.

And how voluptuous were the contours that might be seen through the gauzy drapery,—how soft and yet how firm in their swelling fulness! No portrait by Vandyke or Rubens, in which woman's charms are delineated in such soft luxuriance and with so rich a tone of colour, ever glowed so sensuously upon the canvass as did this lady's fine proportions in their living, warm, and palpitating beauty:—no model which antique statuary has left behind, could exceed the admirable symmetry of the rounded arm!

Then her countenance—how ravishingly beautiful!—her features—how enchantingly lovely!—her looks—how melting, how dreamily soft, how wantonly overpowering!

A profusion of light brown tresses showered on the nude shoulders: and above her polished brow was a wreath of pearls. Her eyes were large and dark,—contrasting strongly with the colour of her hair;—and being full of passion's lustre, they heightened the animation of a countenance every feature of which was eloquent with fervid feelings. Indeed, the aquiline nose—the scarlet lips—the rounded chin,—all indicated an ardent mind and a glowing temperament: while the delicate and scarcely perceptible tinge of the pink which relieved the polished skin from the insipid whiteness of alabaster, would in a moment deepen into warm carnation blushes at the least incident that quickened the pulse and made the blood flow faster in the throbbing veins!

We said that her dress was of an oriental style. A rich veil depended from the pearl-wreath that she wore upon her hair: but that veil flowed behind her, and neither concealed the wanton, impassioned, amorous looks of the countenance, nor the meretricious display of the person. Around her waist a splendid shawl was loosely tied in the fashion of Eastern women: a string of pearls encircled the neck that arched so gracefully;—and rich bracelets defined the rounded shape of the matchless arms. From her waist to her feet the gossamer garment flowed over a pink satin petticoat, the very folds and plaits of which were but so many outward indications of the fine symmetry of those limbs which they concealed: and the small, narrow, shapely foot, imprisoned in an embroidered shoe, rested negligently upon a stool—thus adding to the air of soft and sensuous abandonment in which the lady's form half-reclined on the crimson velvet cushions of the sofa.

The room in which this splendid woman was thus revealed, like an enchanting vision, to the eyes of the Prince Regent, was handsomely furnished and brilliantly lighted. The atmosphere was warm and perfumed—as if the loveliness of its occupant were alike a halo and a fragrance, stealing with intoxicating effect upon the senses. The flood of light which filled the apartment, borrowed a softly roseate hue from the crimson draperies that were drawn close over the windows—the paper on the walls, the cushions of the furniture, and the rich pattern of the carpet,—all being of a corresponding colour.

For some minutes his Royal Highness remained transfixed just within the threshold of the door that had ushered him to this scene of enchantment,—transfixed, we say, and gazing in a wonder that subsided not and with a rapture that cooled not, upon the divinity of the place. At first she either did not notice him, or affected not to do so—but sate, or rather half-reclined in a pensive mood: and thus the perfect abandonment of her attitude developed the charms and graces of her person to the fullest advantage. But at the expiration of a few minutes she turned her head slowly in the direction where the Prince stood;—and as her large dark eyes rested upon his countenance, she started not, nor seemed in any way surprised or alarmed—but a glow of tender delight and melting joy spread over her countenance, descended to her neck, and blushed through the transparent drapery that covered her bosom.

Nor was the look withdrawn: but it settled upon the Regent with a liquid lustre so full of amorous expression and oriental languor, that he felt its influence stealing and growing upon him like that of a delicious dream in which the sleeper is wafted amidst realms of beatific enjoyment. And that look which the lady thus fixed upon him was accompanied by a smile which seemed to welcome him to that abode of bliss,—a smile wherein was concentrated all the profusion of glowing sentiments, burning words, and eloquent avowals which constitute the language of passion,—a smile, too, that revealed teeth white as ivory and parted the scarlet lips which seemed the fitting portals for a balmy breath and a musical voice.

Suddenly remembering the whole train of circumstances which had preceded his introduction to the presence of this heavenly being, the Prince turned to inquire of his masked guide who the lady was and what the adventure signified: but he found that he

was alone with the beauteous occupant of the apartment, and that the door had been closed behind him. For an instant a vague and unknown terror seized upon him: the very mystery of the whole occurrence struck him as ominous and even more than strange—he dreaded some snare, some treachery—and he trembled with bewilderment and doubt. But as his eyes were again turned upon the lady, and as they rested—or rather, were rivetted upon that lovely countenance still glowing with a warm blush, and that form the luxuriant charms of which were displayed so unreservedly and yet without the positive indelicacy that shocks rather than intoxicates the senses,—moreover, as he now met a gaze that, instead of being softly wanton, was all vibrating with desire,—the magic of that beauty and the fire of those glances thrilled like an electric influence through every vein and pierced to his very heart's core.

"Adorable being, who art thou?" he cried, now obeying only the maddening impulse of his feelings: and he advanced towards her.

She rose from the sofa and made him a salutation so full of witching grace that it heightened his emotions to a positive delirium of pleasure: and now that he beheld her close, and saw that all the charms which had ravished him at a distance lost nothing of their glowing loveliness by this near contemplation,—when his eye swept over the flowing outlines and rounded contours of that form which, though not above the middle height, was sultana-like in its imposing as well as dazzling beauty,—he was so ravished, so enchanted, so overpowered, that he felt as if he were in the presence of a being that was something more than mortal.

Resuming her seat upon the sofa, she invited him with a winning gesture and a delicious smile to place himself by her side: then fixing her magnificent eyes upon him, she said in a voice that was soft, timid, and tremulous in its soul-enchanting melody, "Your Royal Highness has asked me who I am: but this is a secret which I dare not reveal?"

"That so divine a creature cannot possibly be connected with a gang of veritable desperadoes, I am well assured," returned the Prince: "and therefore I am at a loss to conceive who or what the men could be that brought me hither."

"Pardon the outrage, sir," exclaimed the lady, in an imploring voice and with looks of the tenderest entreaty.

"I can pardon anything for your sake," was the response, as his Royal Highness fixed gloating looks upon his fair companion's person. "But wherefore was such a course adopted in order to introduce me to your presence?"

The lady threw a glance full of passion and fervid with desire upon the countenance of the enraptured Prince: then, casting down her eyes, while a deep blush suffused her cheeks and spread over her neck, she murmured in a low voice, "Because I love you!"

"O adorable woman!" he exclaimed, with an almost frenzied impetuosity, as he flung his arms around her and strained that warm, glowing, palpitating form to his breast with passionate ardour.

And, as if taken with complete surprise by the suddenness of the action on his part, she offered no instantaneous resistance, but abandoned herself as it were for a few moments to the embrace in which she was thus enfolded and to the burning kisses which the Regent imprinted upon her lips and cheeks: then apparently recovering all her self-possession—and starting as if a sudden thought flashed through her brain to enlighten her upon the danger of her position—she disengaged herself from his arms and sank palpitating with excitement upon the farther extremity of the sofa.

But that contact with the beauteous creature,—the sensation which seemed as if the impress of her person remained upon his arms as the image of her loveliness was stamped upon his soul,—excited the passions of the Prince to a frenzied point: and he sate gazing upon her with devouring looks—longing to rush forward and snatch her to his breast once more—but fearing to offend by too great a precipitation.

"You said that you loved me?" he observed at length.

"And I spoke truly, great Prince!" she replied, now seeming partially to recover herself: but still the rapid swelling and sinking of her bosom was visible through the gossamer drapery. "Listen to me for a short time:—and then—and then——"

"You will be mine?—all mine?" exclaimed she Prince, with the hurried tone and impatient look of a fervid suspense, in which rapturous hope nevertheless predominated.

"Yes—all thine," was the response given murmuringly, and with downcast eyes and glowing cheeks.

"Then speak, lady—speak!" cried the Prince: "but for heaven's sake let not the preface to my perfect bliss be unnecessarily prolonged!"

"I said that I loved your Royal Highness," resumed the lady, in a voice which although low as the murmuring of a silver stream, was tremulously clear as the flow of that rivulet in its pebbly bed;—"and I said truly! Descended from an English father and a Persian mother, my intelligence, my habits, and my language are those of your cold northern clime: but my soul burns with the impassioned and enthusiastic fervour that animates the breasts of those who are born in the far-off orient."

"Charming and mysterious creature!" exclaimed the Prince, gazing on her with an increasing rapture.

"The love that I bear for you," she continued, in that same melting tone which was full of a plaintive harmony, indescribably sweet and profoundly touching, "was engendered in my bosom by the fame of your admirable qualities. I heard that your manners were polished to a degree of refinement seldom attained by the most finished gentlemen,—that your mind was well stored with all valuable knowledge,—that your conversation was fraught with irresistible attractions,—and that you were capable of displaying a winning tenderness, the power of which no woman could feel with impunity. In a word, while sojourning in the east, such rumours and reports reached me concerning you, that I sent to England to procure your portrait: and—of that portrait I became enamoured!" she added, with a bashful hesitation which rendered her voice still more touchingly tremulous and called up a fresh blush to her damask cheeks.

"Oh! if this be all true," exclaimed the Prince, "the adventure is imbued with a tinge of romance which renders it indescribably enchanting!"

"True!" she ejaculated, raising her superb eyes and bending them reproachfully upon him: "Oh! can you suppose that I am capable of deceiving you? Have I journeyed from the east which I love so well, to this cold clime of yours, merely to be received with distrust and experience a chilling sus

picion? Alas! better were it for me to have remained afar off, cherishing this passion of mine as a delicious dream—a joyous delusion—than to have travelled hither to face the stern reality of disappointment!"

"No—do not speak thus, adorable being!" cried the Prince, approaching her with extended arms.

"Not yet—not yet!" she exclaimed, with a sudden access of impetuous excitement: and waving him back, she looked him full in the countenance, as if to read all that was passing in the deepest recesses of his soul. "Do you believe me now?" she demanded, in a tone which appeared to imply that all her happiness was staked upon the answer.

"I do—I do!" exclaimed the Regent, each moment plunging more profoundly into the bliss of an ecstatic infatuation: for every word, every look, every motion on the part of the romantic fair one, only tended to provoke fresh desires and madden his passions beyond all possibility of control.

"Oh! accept my fondest thanks—my sincerest, deepest, most fervid gratitude, for that avowal!" she cried, in the exultation of mingled rapture and triumph: then throwing herself back, she closed her eyes gently, as if to concentrate all her powers of vision, both outward and mental, in the contemplation of the assurance which she had just received and which she treasured up in the recesses of her soul.

The Prince's head was lost as it were amidst all the influences which were brought to bear upon his senses: for this attitude to which the lady had just abandoned herself formed another light in which to view a ravishing picture, and in which new graces and new charms were developed. And as the lady's fervid soul appeared to breathe through her entire person, the impression which each movement on her part made upon the mind, was that all the flexions of her body were the indices of her passions.

Drawing himself towards her in a sidelong manner, the Prince passed his arm gently round her waist—and for a few moments she seemed unconscious of the circumstance. But as he pressed her more sensibly and became bolder in his toyings, she suddenly started—gazed upon him for an instant with a half-wondering, half-affrighted look—and then burst into tears.

Astonished and pained by this abrupt and most unaccountable ebullition of grief, he strained her more closely in his arms—kissed away her tears—and became so moved by her sorrow and so maddened by the contact of her form, that he would have made any sacrifice in order to recall the smiles to her countenance and win from her the favours which she had more than half promised to bestow.

"What grieves you, dearest one?" he murmured soothingly.

"I was suddenly reminded of a circumstance which cuts me to the quick," she answered, in a broken voice and with convulsive sobs.

"But name it—explain yourself," said the Regent. "Is there aught which I can do——"

"Yes—everything!" she replied, accompanying the words with the tenderest caresses.

"Tell me—keep me not in suspense——"

"A person who has merited your displeasure, and who is related to me by the bonds of near kinship——"

"I will forgive him," said the Prince. "Is that all?"

"Oh! it is more than he could hope!" she murmured, pressing closer to her royal companion and redoubling the ardour of her caresses. "But you must sign his pardon——"

"I will sign anything—everything," gasped the infatuated Prince, breathless with maddening passion: "so long as I may seal the same upon your lips."

"Confirm this act of clemency with your autograph," whispered the lady, in her most seductive tones,—"and I am thine! 'Twill be but the work of a moment—there are writing materials upon the table——"

And with her arms still wound about the Prince's neck, and her form half clinging to him—half nestling in his embrace,—she made him rise from the sofa, and drew him gently towards the table. 'Twas, as she had said, the work of but a few moments: and during this brief interval she so played upon his senses by the most thrilling, impassioned, fervid caresses, and by permitting those toyings for which her light apparel allowed such scope, that the Prince reeled as if under the influence of intoxication—and his senses were steeped in that elysian ebriety.

Close by the table there was an ottoman, upon which the royal voluptuary and his companion seated themselves—and on the table there was a paper with something written upon it. The Prince endeavoured to read the lines traced thereon: but the glowing arms drew his head down till it reached a still more palpitating breast—and then, in one of those moments in which a man's senses are so enthralled by woman's magic influence that he would sell his soul to Satan rather than abandon the crowning bliss,—in such a moment was it that his Royal Highness seized the pen and affixed his name to the document.

Then, breathless with the prolonged excitement, he once more strained the lady in his arms: and she murmured with billing tenderness, "I am thine! I am thine!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SEQUEL OF THE NIGHT'S ADVENTURE.

Let us now return to the sable chamber in which Lord Leveson and the Prince Regent's two servants had been left in total darkness.

Their position was far from being agreeable: but they did not see any way in which they could possibly help themselves. The solemn warning given by the leader of the band ere he quitted the room, still continued to ring in their ears long after the sounds of the retreating footsteps had ceased; and although they did not relish the thought of thus being left in the darkness of a strange place, where a myriad unknown dangers might surround them, they dared not move from the seats which they had taken nor yet give utterance to even a whispered syllable.

In silence and darkness, therefore, did upwards of twenty minutes elapse: and at the expiration of this period returning footsteps were heard, descending the great staircase—and the chief, bearing the lantern in his hand, appeared from behind the sable drapery.

But at the same instant that the light thus gleamed in its dimness again,—shadowing forth the gloom of the apartment, and playing with ghastly reflection upon the countenances of the nobleman and the servants,—these three prisoners became aware that there

was another masked individual present in the chamber, besides the leader who had just re-entered. Motionless and statue-like stood that *other*, close by the spot where the sable curtain covered the door which had admitted them into the room: there he stood—a mysterious sentinel as he was—with the black mask upon his countenance and a pistol in each hand!

But how noiselessly he must have entered!—unless indeed, he had all along been in the room—having perhaps followed the party in at the outset, and having remained concealed behind the drapery which was let down over the door, until the departure of the chief with the lantern was the signal for him to glide noiselessly forth and guard the movements as well as listen to the discourse of the Marquis and the servants. But as they had neither budged an inch nor spoken a word, the precautions taken proved to be unnecessary. Nevertheless, the presence of the sentinel there convinced the nobleman and the domestics that the warning which they had received was no idle threat, and that they had acted prudently in yielding obedience to its terms.

The Marquis and the royal servants were both surprised and alarmed when they saw the masked individual with the lantern return unaccompanied by the Prince Regent: and the old nobleman, plucking up a spirit, said, "Where is his Royal Highness? Remember that he is the son of your Sovereign ——"

"For which circumstance I care not a solitary fig," observed the chief. "But you may make your mind easy, my lord: the Prince is in excellent company, and no doubt as happy as possible," he added, with a slight accent of sarcasm in his tone.

"When will he return to us?" inquired the Marquis: "and when, also, shall we be emancipated from this incomprehensible thraldom?"

"See what o'clock it is by your watch, my lord," said the chief, approaching with the lantern.

"Ten minutes to two," observed the Marquis of Leveson, as he drew forth a superb watch set with brilliants, and the value of which was at least a hundred guineas.

"I will thank you for that bauble," said the leader, in a cool off-hand fashion.

"What!" ejaculated the nobleman, springing from his seat: "are you highwaymen after all? I had entertained a more lofty opinion of you ——"

"Then what did you take us for?" demanded the leader. "Knights-errant of modern times?"

"I could not, nor can I, conjecture the object which you had in view in bringing us hither," said the Marquis: "but when I found that you did not rob us upon the spot where you assailed us in the first instance, I naturally concluded that you had some aim beyond plunder!"

"And so we have," replied the chief. "But we mix up two or three agreeable things together and thus blend our avocations: don't we, Daniel?"

"To be sure we do," was the laconic answer given by the sentinel stationed near the door.

"And therefore, my lord," continued the chief, "I will trouble you for that watch—and those diamond rings on your fingers—and likewise your purse, while you are about it."

The Marquis of Leveson yielded with a good grace to these demands; for, considering his enormous wealth, the loss of the jewels and the money was not a matter calculated to break his heart—and, besides, he saw how completely he was in the power of the depredator.

"Oh! fie, my lord!" exclaimed this individual, as he turned out the contents of the purse in the palm of his hand. "A nobleman of your rank and property to have only a poor, paltry fifty-three guineas about your person. Really it is incredible. But perhaps you have a pocket-book?"

"Here it is," said the Marquis, producing it with evident reluctance. "There may be a Bank-note or two—to which you are most welcome: but if there should happen to be any private papers——"

"Which there are, no doubt," observed the masked leader: then, as he took the pocket-book, he said, "How much will your lordship give to have this returned to you just as it is, and unopened?"

"Give it me back at once," cried the Marquis, eagerly clutching at the offer of a compromise, "and I will pay a thousand guineas to-morrow to whomsoever you may appoint to receive the same."

"Ah! then the pocket-book is worth at least a thousand guineas, according to your own admission," said the desperado, with a quiet chuckle at the tact whereby he had succeeded in eliciting the offer. "Well, my lord, you will just double that sum——"

"Double it!" exclaimed the Marquis. "What? two thousand guineas for the pocket-book? Well—give it me at once—and—and—I'll agree."

"Two thousand guineas is the ransom-money, then? But your lordship must not think that I can part with the security before I finger the cash."

"I pledge you my word as a nobleman and a gentleman that the amount shall be forthcoming——"

"And a Bow Street constable likewise, for the person who calls to receive it—eh?" observed the masked leader. "No, no, my lord—I don't do things after this fashion. Daniel," he said, turning towards the sentinel, "procure a sheet of paper and some sealing-wax."

The man disappeared behind the drapery—and during his absence a solemn silence prevailed in the room. The Marquis paced backward and forward in deep and uneasy meditation—for he was cruelly annoyed at the idea of his pocket-book falling into strange and unscrupulous hands:—the two servants exchanged significant looks, as if mutually asking where, when, and how the mysterious adventure was to terminate;—and the unknown leader examined the costly watch and the diamond rings with looks that flashed joyfully through the eyelet-holes of the mask.

In three minutes his man came back with the articles required; and the leader said, "Now, my lord, envelop the pocket-book in this paper—and seal it with your own signet."

"But you have got all my rings," exclaimed the Marquis.

"True! I will give back the one that has your crest engraved on the stone; and you can seal the packet therewith. If it be returned to you with that seal unbroken, you will be satisfied?"

"Assuredly," said the Marquis: and the pocket-book was enveloped and sealed accordingly—the leader of the band retaining the parcel, and the nobleman restoring the signet-ring to his own finger. "But now, when and by what means will the pocket-book be given back to me?—and how am I to pay the ransom money?"

"Remain at home all day long on Wednesday," was the reply; "and take care to have the two thousand guineas ready at hand—indeed, about your person—and leave the rest to me."

"All day long on Wednesday," said the Marquis,

in a musing tone to himself: "that will do very well. Had it been Friday, I must have declined—positively declined, at any risk—*that* being my day for the charming Venetia Trelawney."

The conversation now dropped: and it seemed tolerably certain, to the supreme satisfaction of the coachman and valet, that *they* were not to be laid under contribution in respect to their watches and money. No doubt the masked chieftain fancied they did not possess anything of particular value: or else he scorned the idea of plundering domestic servants.

An hour elapsed—and at length a bell rang in the interior of the house.

"You will soon take your departure now," said the leader: and, having thus spoken, he disappeared once more with the lantern.

In about five minutes he returned, followed by the Prince—and ejaculations of joy fell from the lips of the Marquis and the two servants. Dim and feeble as was the light shed by the lantern, it was nevertheless sufficient to show that the countenance of his Royal Highness wore a smile of complacent satisfaction which he could not altogether subdue, though he evidently essayed to conceal it. But there was little leisure for the Marquis of Leveson or the royal domestics to indulge in conjectures as to what might have occurred to the Regent: for the man Daniel immediately raised the drapery covering the door—and the leader, having extinguished the lantern, guided the Prince, the Marquis, and the two servants back to the carriage, into which he himself followed them as before.

The blinds of the vehicle were again drawn up—the massive gates were opened—and the equipage rolled away, under the same circumstances as it arrived. That is to say, two of the desperadoes

were seated on the box, and five followed on horse-back—the chief, as already mentioned, being inside to keep guard upon the prisoners.

At the expiration of about half-an-hour, during which a profound silence was observed in the interior of the vehicle, the equipage stopped. The leader put down the blinds—opened the door—and sprang forth. The moon was now riding high in the heavens; and it immediately became apparent to the royal party, as they glanced forth from the windows, that the carriage had brought them back to the very spot where the desperadoes had stopped it upwards of three hours before.

The two men had already leapt from the box—and the servants, being now permitted to issue from the interior, resumed their places outside.

"Good night—or rather, good morning," said the leader of the masked band.

"Good morning," returned Lord Leveson, who thought it prudent to be civil until fairly out of the hands of the formidable troop: and the next moment the carriage rolled rapidly away.

The Prince and the Marquis now began to exchange those explanations which they mutually longed to receive. The nobleman's story was short enough—but it nevertheless caused the Regent the utmost amazement, inasmuch as he had hitherto felt convinced that plunder formed no part of the disguised desperadoes' aims. The discovery of the fact that the very contrary was the case, for a moment damped the pleasurable feelings which his strange and exciting love-adventure had left behind: and he began to think that he had been made the dupe of some unprincipled adventuress, instead of having been the object of a disinterested affection on the part of a lady who had travelled all the way from the east to enjoy his company and who had been compelled to have recourse to extraordinary measures to procure the gratification of her passion.

However, he related his adventure to the Marquis, who listened with the profoundest attention and the liveliest interest—especially to those portions of the narrative in which the Prince delineated the charms, fascinations, and seductive powers of the beauteous lady.

"And upon what understanding did you separate?" inquired the Marquis.

"The time slipped away with marvellous rapidity, while we lay clasped in each other's arms," responded his Royal Highness: "and my thoughts—my senses—all my faculties, were so absorbed in the intoxicating bliss which I thus experienced, that I forgot to question her minutely upon those matters concerning which it was most necessary for me to be enlightened. But I presume that even if I had put such inquiries, she would have evaded all satisfactory answers—and thus, in any case, was I no doubt doomed to depart in ignorance of who she is, what is her name, where she lives, and why she adopted such extraordinary precautions to shroud herself in an impenetrable secrecy. Ah! let her be what she may, Leveson, she is not the less an adorable creature—and I would give the world to obtain her altogether as a mistress!"

"But under what circumstances did you part?" inquired the nobleman.

"The time-piece upon the mantel proclaimed the hour of three," said the Prince: "and then she started from my arms, declaring that we must separate immediately. I implored her to allow me to remain a little longer—but she was peremptory. Then I besought her to promise that we should meet again—and she cheerfully acquiesced, reserving to herself the privilege of making the appointment. She vowed that she would write to me in the course of a few days: then, having rung a bell, she embraced me with impassioned fervour and hurried me away. Outside the door I found the man with the lantern—and he escorted me back to the room where you were waiting."

"And the deed which you signed, sir?" remarked Lord Leveson, interrogatively.

"Ah! that circumstance begins to vex me," exclaimed the Prince: "but I did it in a moment of such infatuation, that if it were the assignment of my soul to the Evil One, I should not have hesitated. Whatever the document might have been, its nature must transpire sooner or later—and it will no doubt furnish a clue to the correct reading of the entire mystery. But for the life of me I cannot fix upon any one who, having offended me, would be auxious to receive my written pardon——"

"Is it not probable that your Royal Highness has signed that pardon, not in any private capacity, but in your executive position as Regent of the Kingdom?" observed the Marquis of Leveson, in a serious tone.

"It may be so,' observed the Prince, with the impatience of vexation: "and if your surmise is correct, I have done a very foolish thing—that is all! But it is useless to deplore what cannot be recalled," added his Royal Highness, after a brief pause, and in that devil-me-care spirit which he so frequently summoned to his aid in the same way as a desperate man has recourse to alcoholic liquors to drown care.

"And does your Royal Highness wish to fathom the whole affair to the bottom without delay," asked Leveson,—"or to wait and see whether the lady will perform her promise of writing to you?"

"Can you suggest any means of unravelling the skein of the mystery?" demanded the Prince. "But remember that we dare not adopt any course calculated to give publicity to the adventure: otherwise we should be laughed at by our friends and reviled by our enemies."

"I am aware of the necessity of throwing a veil over all such occurrences in which the honour or character of your Royal Highness may in any way be mixed up," said Leveson: "but still I think that a private and secret investigation might be set afoot——"

"How?—by what means?" asked the Prince impatiently. "I repeat that whether this woman be an adventuress or not—a well-meaning lady or the associate of brigands—I care not. I am enamoured of her, Leveson — deeply, desperately enamoured of her—and I would adopt any measure that is likely to trace her out, provided that all chance of exposure be avoided."

"I view the thing precisely in the same light," returned the Marquis. "Some time on Wednesday I shall be called upon to pay the two thousand guineas ransom-money: and I thought of employing an active, intelligent, crafty Bow Street officer to follow the person who may come for the money——"

"Excellent! Nothing could be better!" exclaimed the Prince. "But mind that in whatever account you choose to give the officer, you keep my name out of the question."

"As a matter of course," replied the Marquis.

"And also that if you discover a clue to the reading of the mystery," added the Prince, "you will not avail yourself of it to obtain the lady as your own mistress."

"I pledge you my honour, sir, on that point," rejoined the nobleman. "But since you are so enamoured of this syren in the gossamer dress, your Royal Highness will have no heart left to bestow upon the beauteous Venetia Trelawney."

"I really don't think I shall," said the Regent: "and if it weren't that we have made a compact and that there are six thousand guineas to be got by carrying off the lady-prize——"

"You would abandon your chance?" cried the Marquis, eagerly.

"I think I should," responded the royal voluptuary. "But I will not pledge myself on that point, because——"

"Because the impression produced by the lady in the gossamer costume may wear off?" observed the Marquis.

"No—that is impossible!" exclaimed the Prince. "But because there would be something delightful and entertaining to a degree in triumphing over such men as Curzon, Huntingdon, Malpas, Sackville, and yourself."

"Will you make a bargain with me, sir?" asked Leveson, at the expiration of a few minutes' silence.

"Name it," said the Prince Regent.

"If I succeed in obtaining for you your lady in the gossamer dress, you will abandon to me all your chances of success with Venetia Trelawney," explained the nobleman: "and should I carry off the prize through *your* assistance, I undertake to hand over the six thousand guineas to your Royal Highness."

"But how can I possibly put you in my place," demanded the Prince, "supposing that I do avail myself of my turn to call on Venetia, and supposing also that she should look with a favourable eye upon my addresses?"

"Leave that to me," said the Marquis. "Only promise to tell me everything that passes between yourself and Venetia—and if you should succeed in making an impression on her and inducing her to consider your proposals for her to become your mistress——"

"I will solemnly and sacredly pledge myself to tell you word for word, and detail for detail, all that passes between us," said the Prince: "and I will assist you to the utmost of my power to obtain possession of Venetia — always supposing, as a matter of course, that I experience any encouragement on her part."

"Good!" exclaimed the Marquis. "And in return I will do all I can to throw the gossamer lady into your arms once more."

"And this agreement must of course remain profoundly secret between you and me," observed the Prince.

"Undoubtedly so," replied the Marquis of Leveson.

And as the carriage continued to roll onward at a rapid rate towards London, the Prince Regent and his noble friend beguiled the time in discussing the projects which they had thus initiated.

CHAPTER IX.

LOUISA.

RETURN we now to that beautiful cottage in the neighbourhood of the ancient city of Canterbury, where we first introduced the Stanley family to the reader.

Louisa, the younger sister, has already been described as one of those charming creatures whose winning grace and amiable simplicity, while ravishing the heart of the beholder, encourage no other feelings than those of the purest, tenderest, and holiest character. Unless, indeed, it be a heart that never beats save with a frantic violence of the grossest animal passions: but dread, terrible, and ferocious to an extreme must be the nature of that man who could dare to harbour a dishonouring hope or a vile intent with respect to such a being as Louisa Stanley.

She was but little more than nineteen years of age,—so young, so fair, that it seemed as if heaven could never permit either time or sorrow to trace one line upon the frank and open brow of that loveliest of its creations. Her whole form was characterised by girlish symmetry and womanly elegance, so blended as to constitute alike the grace and the glory of her nineteen summers,—virgin modesty subduing as it were the radiance of her beauty, and bashful timidity serving as a natural veil for that loveliness the perfection of which was not dreamt of by herself.

It would be impossible to conceive a more heavenly being, alike in form and mind. She was not tall—but the sylphid slenderness of her shape made her seem taller than she really was. And though of this nymph-like symmetry, she was not thin, but of exquisite proportions—her figure being characterised by that gradual and easy transition between all the contours and by that beautiful softness of outline which realise the matchless graces of Grecian statues. The impression her appearance left upon the mind was that of exquisite beauty without the faintest tinge of voluptuousness: and lovely though she were, yet did she seem loveable only with an æsthetic tenderness and a chaste affection—not with the ardour of sensual passion or the fervid longings of desire. In a word, she was just such a being concerning whom the wish would be expressed that she might remain in her virgin purity and maiden innocence for ever.

Her dark brown hair was parted above a forehead that looked the chosen seat of candour and where chastity sate enthroned in vesture of stainless white: and the long tresses, glossy and smooth as velvet, formed as it were a frame for the charming countenance. Her complexion was fair—the cheeks not exactly of a rose colour, but of an animated white, so that without being absolutely pale, they were of the delicate bloom which deepens only through emotion or exercise into the vermeil of the peach. The well-cut lips, of bright coral redness, showed that she had the health of youth: sweet lips they were too—not luscious with sensuality of expression—but formed for the smiles of innocent mirth and the kisses of chastest love. The delicately pencilled but arching brows—the deep blue eyes, fringed with

long lashes—the small straight nose—and the softly rounded chin without a dimple, completed the charming face.

We must not however forget to observe that her teeth were of pearly whiteness—that her neck was long and gracefully arching—and that her shoulders had a beautiful slope: nor should we omit to state that her hands were exquisitely formed, with tapering fingers and rose-tinted nails—and that no sculptor could have modelled the feet and ankles of his statue to a more charming symmetry.

Such was Louisa Stanley—one of those heavenly beings for whom the Garden of Eden should have been suffered to remain as a habitation during their sojourn upon earth. For it seemed cruel—Oh! too cruel to expose so bright yet delicate a flower to the bleak winds and cutting blasts of this cold world of our's! In the sequestration of that charming retreat where her existence had hitherto been passed, she was so completely withdrawn from the irregularity of feeling, the conflict of emotions, the distracting influences, and the giddy whirl and bustle of what is called "life," that the natural purity of her soul was cherished and maintained in that innocent inexperience which constituted alike the ornament of her character and the danger of her position. She knew no more of the villanies of the world than a child of the tropics knows of Lapland's eternal ice or of Labrador's incessant storms: and on the other hand, she was as ignorant of all the luxurious pleasures, the voluptuous enjoyments, and the sensual delights in which mankind indulge, as the dweller in hyperborean realms is unacquainted with the fruits of the Indian clime.

Who, then, was to guide this young—this fair—this artless girl over the rough places of the world? —who was to warn her of the shoals, the rocks, and the quicksands which beset the frail bark that bounds over the waves of the stupendous ocean of life? Alas! alas! does not the child disport upon the edge of the yawning gulf, amidst the flowers that conceal the dangerous brink? —does not the innocent bird sip the honey-dew while a serpent glides along the blossom-laden bough, ready to spring?

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Two months have elapsed since Clara and Louisa Stanley parted in front of the cottage-portico,—eight long weeks since they exchanged the farewell kiss beneath that natural canopy of honey-suckles and roses.

And in the meantime what has happened to Louisa?

In order to make all this intelligible to our readers, we must go back to the period at which the separation took place, as described in our First Introductory Chapter.

How anxiously, on the second morning after Clara's departure, did Louisa watch for the coming of the postman! She knew that ten was his time to pass along the road on which the cottage looked: but a full hour before—indeed, as the clocks of the old cathedral and the many churches of Canterbury were striking nine—was the young maiden at the garden-wicket, gazing wistfully in the direction whence he must come. At last he made his appearance: but had he a letter for her? Oh! how quickly and how thrillingly beat every pulse as Louisa's eyes marked his approach! But—behold! he crosses the road—he selects a letter from the packet which he carries in his hand —he comes towards her. Another minute—but what an age of anxiety and suspense was that minute!——and she receives the welcome, oh, so welcome missive!

The handwriting of her dearly-beloved sister is immediately recognised—and, with beating heart and trembling hands, she tears open the letter. It contains a Bank-note: but for this apparent evidence of Clara's success in her mission Louisa recks not—all her interest, all her anxiety, all her thoughts are absorbed in the desire to ascertain whether that sister be coming home again without delay!

But we will give the contents of that letter over which her eyes now ran—or rather swept, with such lightning speed, as if eager to embrace at a single glance all that Clara said:—

"*London, July 17th*, 1814.

"I am safe, well, and happy, my ever dearest Louisa—that is to say, as happy as I can possibly be while absent from home. May God grant, however, that you are still more happy, my darling sister—for there is no amount of happiness that I do not wish you or that you are undeserving to enjoy! I have not much leisure to write at any length to-day. But in a few words I will endeavour to relieve you from all the suspense which I know you are experiencing on my account. I have found Mr. Beckford, who is a kind-hearted, amiable, and excellent old gentleman and takes the deepest interest in all that concerns us. It was entirely through a mistake, which he has explained, that our draught upon him was not honoured; and as a proof that he not only regrets the inconvenience and apprehensions which we may have experienced, he has desired me to forward you the Bank-note for a hundred pounds, which I now enclose. But he will on no account part with me yet. He insists upon me remaining for a few weeks with Mrs. Beckford and himself. How can I possibly refuse? He is our benefactor—our kind friend: his purse is the bounteous source of our subsistence. For it is only through motives of ancient friendship for our poor afflicted aunt and our deceased parents that he thus constitutes himself our benefactor. We have no real claims upon him whatsoever. You will therefore perceive, my dearest sister, that I cannot possibly refuse to be in some way guided by his wishes; and indeed, it is for our mutual interest that I am bound to yield to his request that I should pass a few weeks at his house.

"I need not say, my beloved Loo, how confident I am that you will continue to devote yourself to the saint-like duty of ministering to our afflicted aunt. It is useless to say, '*Remember me most kindly and dutifully to her*,' because heaven has deprived her of the faculty of understanding the message of sincerest affection. But my prayers continue to be offered up on her behalf; and I feel happy in the thought that all the attentions which can possibly surround her are sedulously and tenderly ministered by you.

"I forgot to observe that Mr. Beckford has moved from Hanover Square; and that his present residence is No. 13, Stratton Street, where you must address your letters. I am longing—most ardently longing to hear from you; and shall anxiously await the return of post.

"Your ever affectionate sister,

"CLARA STANLEY."

Over this letter did Louisa shed tears of mingled joy and grief,—joy at the success of her sister's mission and the kindness shown towards her in London —and grief at the thought of being separated from her for some weeks. But youth is not the period when grief can easily outbalance joy;—and therefore the maiden soon wiped away her tears and sate down to write an affectionate answer to Clara's epistle.

This occupied her until nearly mid-day—for she penned a very long letter, full of the tenderest and fondest expressions of sisterly love: and when it was finished she determined upon taking it herself to the post-office in Canterbury and changing the Bank-note at the same time.

It was not often that Louisa quitted the cottage: but when she did, it was in the full conviction that her poor helpless aunt would be properly attended to by the maid-servant. For Mary was a good-tempered, honest, and trustworthy young woman, —very simple-minded and even ignorant—but devoted to the ladies in whose service she had been for four or five years, and especially attached to Miss Louisa.

In her plain but tasteful apparel did the maiden sally forth—and in a quarter of an hour she entered the old city of Canterbury. Her first care was to deposit the letter at the post-office; and thence she repaired to the establishment of the friendly banker of whom we have spoken in our First Introductory Chapter.

To this gentleman she explained the success of her sister's mission, upon which he offered his congratulations: and, having procured change for the note, she took her leave. At the same moment a person, dressed in a clerical suit of black, and who had been receiving cash for a cheque at the banking-house, followed her out;—and, unnoticed by the maiden, he continued to watch her along two or three streets until she entered a grocer's shop at which she was accustomed to deal. There she remained for a few minutes, in order to make some requisite purchases; and on issuing forth again she found herself face to face with the clerically-dressed gentleman whom she had observed at the banker's. He politely made way for her to pass: but instead of entering the shop, he immediately addressed her.

"Pardon me, young lady," he said, "but I wish to give you a friendly hint. I saw you receive a considerable sum of money just now; and you placed the roll of small Bank-notes which you obtained, in that pocket-book which you are now carrying in your hand. Might you not drop it—or leave it inadvertently behind you in some tradesman's shop?"

"I thank you, sir, for your kindness," said Louisa, naturally supposing the advice to be proffered in a friendly and disinterested spirit—especially as the gentleman evidently belonged to the church: and having secured the pocket-book about her person, the young lady saluted the stranger with a graceful inclination of the head, and passed on.

But in a few minutes he was again by her side: and in a voice that was full of benevolence and a manner that denoted a sort of paternal interest, he said, "It seems that we are walking in the same direction: and if you do not demur, I will afford myself the pleasure of escorting you so far as our ways are identical."

Now, in spite of her inexperience, the teachings of her aunt, previous to that good relative's affliction—the education she had received—the results of her useful readings—and her own innate sense of propriety, all made Louisa aware that there was something singular and unusual, if not absolutely indiscreet and improper, in the proposal of the reverend gentleman. Accordingly, with an air of true dignity as maidenly as it was lady-like, she said, "I thank you, sir—but I am about to visit several shops:" and she instantaneously entered the establishment of another tradesman with whom she dealt.

In the attention which Louisa now devoted to the purchases which she had to make at this shop, she almost immediately ceased to think of the little incident that had just occurred: but the stranger was all the while waiting at a short distance, until she should come forth again.

He was a man of about forty years of age, and would have been remarkably handsome were it not for the sinister expression of his countenance and the lines which evil passions and dissipation had traced upon his features. His look was therefore disagreeable—or at all events, not prepossessing: but the world believed that it was profound study and deep thought that had fixed an air of settled seriousness upon his face and prematurely marked it with those harsh lines. For, as his apparel denoted, he was a clergyman: and although he had been but a short time resident in Canterbury, yet as his appointment to ecclesiastical preferment in this city had arisen from strong interest in high quarters and from aristocratic connexions, he had not failed to find sycophants and parasites ready to trumpet forth his praises for piety, honour, and moral worth, even before he had given a single proof that he was deserving of such adulation. That he was eloquent as a preacher, was however speedily shown; and eloquence in a parson is frequently taken as a guarantee for godliness likewise. Then, inasmuch as he was often exploring the antique nooks, the subterranean vaults or crypt, and the cloistral curiosities of the fine old cathedral, his reputation as a man of an inquiring disposition and studious cast of mind was confirmed: and thus was he looked upon with respect and veneration by the citizens of Canterbury generally.

He was unmarried, and dwelt in an old but spacious house in the immediate vicinage of the cathedral. This house had once belonged to the monastic establishment which was attached in former times to the venerable pile; and as it stood in a sort of court that was entered by arched passages in one direction, and an old gate-way in another, its site was as gloomy as its aspect. Traditionary superstition declared that the place was haunted; and assuredly, if the shades of the departed ever return to the scenes that were once familiar to them upon earth, the house and the court of which we are speaking appeared precisely those where such spectral visitations would occur.

We have already said that the clergyman's features were handsome: we may add that in person he was tall and well built. He possessed a splendid voice, which he could so modulate as to suit any style of discourse: thus was it sonorous and deep when in the most impressive parts of his sermons or his conversation—melancholy and soft when he wished to appeal to the finer feelings of his listeners—loud and thundering when he chose to be denunciatory—benevolent and plaintive when he spoke as a kind pastor to a docile flock. In the pulpit, especially, he appeared to the utmost advantage: for there, being at too great a distance to allow the congregation to observe the true expression of his features, that countenance seemed

truly and veritably stamped with the traces of profound study, and the deeper marks of a stern conviction and a thorough earnestness of purpose — that is to say, in a religious sense. Thus, when his dark brown hair was thrown back from his ample forehead, and his piercing black eyes flashed the fires that accompanied an impassioned oratory—and when, too, he gesticulated with a violence seldom indulged in by clergymen of the Established Church,—he seemed like a modern Peter the Hermit fulminating against Mussulmans and intent upon gathering proselytes for the insane purpose of a crusade.

Such was the individual who had accosted Louisa Stanley in the manner already described, and who was now waiting for her reappearance from the second shop which she had entered to make purchases. To her he was personally unknown, as the reader has already seen—although had he declared his name she would immediately have recognised it as that of the eminent preacher who had only lately come to reside at Canterbury and of whom she had heard mention made by the few persons of her acquaintance.

It may be well imagined that Louisa Stanley was both amazed and annoyed when, on leaving the shop, she found the clergyman waiting at a little distance. For a moment she stopped short, uncertain whether to proceed or to return into the shop: but reflecting that this latter course would only expose her to much unpleasant observation, if she were to mention the cause of her annoyance, she hastily crossed the street and passed along on the side opposite to that where her tormentor was posted. He did not move, but affected to be occupied in examining some religious prints in a shop window; and Louisa, hastening her pace, emerged from the street and in a few minutes reached that beautiful pleasure-ground known as the Dane John.

This is a large enclosure, containing shady avenues, gardens, and grass-plats. One side is bounded by the remains of the wall that in ancient times belonged to the fortifications, and which is now converted into an agreeable walk. The outer side, protected by a rude stone parapet, with the ruins of watch-towers at short intervals, overlooks the moat, which is now a garden: and the inner side presents to the view a sloping embankment of verdure. In the centre of the Dane John, and with one of its sides abutting against the wall, rises an immense mound, with an easy ascent of circling walks fringed by hedges: and on the top is a marble pillar, the base of which is furnished with seats for the accommodation of those who repair thither to inhale the breeze or to enjoy the splendid prospect which the circumjacent scene affords.

Louisa's shortest way homeward was through the Dane John: and she was threading the beautiful avenue of trees which intersects the enclosure, when she heard footsteps approaching from behind in a hasty manner. Struck by the idea that some one was endeavouring to overtake her, she glanced round—and the next moment the clergyman was by her side.

"I said ere now that our ways were apparently lying in the same direction," he immediately observed, with that blandness of manner and suavity of tone which he knew so well how to assume; "and I was not mistaken. Permit me to escort you ——"

"Pardon me, sir," interrupted Louisa, with a tremulous voice and timid air, — "but I must respectfully decline ——"

"Young lady, I am a minister of the Gospel," said the clergyman, his tone now becoming solemn and impressive; "and there is no impropriety in your accepting my escort. Is it possible that you hesitate, when my motive is one of kindness?—for I like not to behold a lady of your age wandering thus alone."

"What can there be to fear, sir?" exclaimed Louisa, astonished at the observation.

"Everything!" replied the clergyman. "The world abounds with temptations and perils; and it is the duty of my sacred calling not only to warn the unsuspicious but likewise to defend the unprotected."

"I thank you, sir, most sincerely," murmured Louisa, somewhat alarmed by the vague mention thus made of contingent dangers, and feeling that she had probably behaved ungratefully in showing a disinclination to accept the escort of one whose aspect and bearing displayed so much frankness and benevolence.

"You are young—and doubtless aware that you are beautiful," continued the clergyman, his words suddenly calling up a deep blush to the cheeks of the maiden, whose ideas were also thrown into a strange and painful confusion by language which she now heard for the first time:—"yes, you are young and beautiful," he repeated slowly, as he watched the effect which his remark produced: "and the path of the young and beautiful is always interspersed with hidden pit-falls. Think you that the mission of the clergyman is merely to enunciate these doctrines from the pulpit? No—it is likewise to proclaim them aloud, or to whisper them softly, wherever the warning may seem to be required, and according to circumstances. Hence it is that I have accosted you, young lady: for there is something in your appearance which inspires me with the same interest that I should experience towards a daughter, did I possess one."

Louisa knew not what to think—what to say—or what to do. She felt uneasy—annoyed—embarrassed. It seemed as if two distinct voices were whispering their suggestions in the profundities of her soul,—one telling her that she should not listen to the man who thus forced himself upon her notice—the other assuring her that all he said was sincere and well-meant. She threw a rapid, furtive look upon him—and his countenance was such as to increase her apprehensions: but his voice, as it still sounded in her ears, was fraught with benevolence and paternal kindness. She felt, in fine, as if some vague presentiment of evil had seized upon her, and which she could not shake off, although on the other hand she knew it to be a mere delusion.

At length, feeling the necessity of adopting some decisive course in order to escape from a perplexity which was becoming absolutely painful,—and summoning all her presence of mind to her aid,—she said, "Will you tell me, sir, the nature of those perils which now environ me?"

"First, young lady," returned the reverend gentleman, "be kind enough to say whether you know who I am."

"I do not, sir," answered Louisa: "but I presume that you are a clergyman."

"You have doubtless heard of the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley, one of the Minor Canons of Canterbury Cathedral?" said the clergyman, giving utterance to his name and distinctions with the measured tone and deliberate manner of one who felt conscious, or at least expected, that they would make a due impression upon the mind of the hearer.

"I have heard of you, sir," replied Louisa, experiencing that sensation of reverential awe which seizes upon the timid mind when suddenly made aware of the presence of some great or distinguished personage.

"And now, then, will you believe that I am animated by the best and kindest motives in proffering you my counsel?" asked Mr. Audley, in his blandest tones.

"I could not suppose that it was otherwise," said the young maiden. "But you spoke of dangers——"

"Tell me who you are," interrupted the Minor Canon. "Do you dwell in this neighbourhood—with your parents——"

"Alas! sir, I have no parents living," returned Louisa, in a tremulous tone: "but I live at a short distance hence—with an afflicted relative, who has lost the faculties of reason and speech: and an only sister, whom I dearly love, is now on a visit to some friends in London——"

"And you are therefore alone with this afflicted relative?" said Bernard Audley, as his eyes swept with a sort of ravenous expression of desire over the beauteous form of the innocent maiden.

"Alone—with my poor aunt," murmured Louisa, with downcast looks and trembling voice: for the turn which the discourse had just taken, reminded her of her lonely condition and revived her regrets at the absence of her sister.

"Now tell me your name, young lady—and where you live," continued Mr. Audley: "and I will prove a friend to you."

As he thus spoke, his eyes swept rapidly up and down the umbrageous avenue—and, observing no one near, he took the maiden's hand. But, with the instinctive impulse of virgin purity, she instantaneously withdrew it—and at the same moment a young gentleman sprang up from a bench which was deeply set as it were in the shade of some thick evergreens.

His appearance was so sudden and was made with such startling abruptness, that a faint cry of mingled surprise and alarm fell from the lips of Louisa Stanley—while the Canon gave vent to an ejaculation expressive not only of annoyance, but also of recognition with regard to the new-comer.

"Mr. Audley," exclaimed the young gentleman, fixing his eyes indignantly upon the Canon, and speaking in a voice that seemed to imply some conscious power of command over the individual thus imperiously addressed,—"Mr. Audley, this lady cannot possibly be benefitted by *your* friendship. You understand me, sir!"

"But, my dear Mr. Loftus, you mistake me—I can assure you that you are doing me an injustice!" said the Minor Canon, in a tone that was alike entreating and deprecatory.

"Enough, sir! I understand you but too well," returned the young gentleman, with haughty indignation: then, fixing his eyes upon Bernard Audley with a deeper significancy than those looks had even expressed at first, he said in a low and rapid whisper, "Remember the scene in the cloister—and begone!"

A cloud, black as night, suddenly overspread the features of the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral: and darting a look of diabolical hatred upon the young gentleman, he turned abruptly away and disappeared behind a group of trees forming the angle of a gravel-walk that diverged from the great central avenue.

CHAPTER X.

JOCELYN.

The little incident which so promptly disembarrassed Louisa Stanley of the presence of Mr. Bernard Audley and left her in the company of Mr. Loftus, scarcely occupied a minute. But the whole proceeding, brief as it was, naturally excited the utmost wonderment on the part of the young maiden. She did not however catch those last words that had produced such sudden and talismanic effect upon the Canon by so forcibly reminding him of some scene in the Cathedral cloister: but she saw enough to convince her at the instant that Mr. Loftus exercised a potent sway over the reverend gentleman.

Trembling and almost sinking with the prolonged excitement caused by the whole tenour of the Canon's conduct towards her, and which had just experienced so singular a termination, Louisa was pale as death and looked as if she were about to faint. The young gentleman hastened to assist her to the bench where he himself had just before been seated: and remaining standing in her presence, he besought her to calm her agitation.

There was something so touchingly kind—so deeply sympathetic—so tenderly reassuring in his voice and manner, that Louisa felt as if she were being addressed by some tried, well-known, and valued friend: and raising her blue eyes, she looked up with all the eloquence of silent gratitude beaming in her countenance. For she felt that Mr. Loftus had done her some signal service by ridding her of the presence of the Canon—although her ideas upon the subject were still confused, vague, and undefined.

The young gentleman was about two or three and twenty years of age, and remarkably handsome. His complexion was a clear rich brown, with the glow of health upon the cheeks. His jet black hair, fine and glossy as that of a woman, was worn long and curled naturally; and his large dark eyes beamed with intelligence, while his lofty forehead appeared the seat of the noblest thoughts. His profile was completely rectilinear and in the purest style of Grecian manly beauty—the nose being perfectly straight, and the upper lip short and curved, like those of the ancient statues of Apollo. In the expression of his countenance frankness and candour were blended with intellectuality and the light of genius: indeed, nothing could be more prepossessing than the appearance of Jocelyn Loftus.

He was not particularly tall; but his slender figure, upright as a dart, was modelled to the most

perfect masculine symmetry. He was well dressed, but without finery or pretension; and his manners were elegant and fascinating, without the slightest tinge of reserve and hauteur on the one hand, or affectation and familiarity on the other. He was just such a young man whose attentions could not fail to give pleasure to the purest-minded maiden, nor be received with impunity where the heart was previously disengaged.

Such was Jocelyn Loftus, the origin of whose acquaintance with Louisa Stanley has just been described. How he came to interfere in her behalf, when he saw her walking with the Minor Canon of the Cathedral, and when this individual endeavoured to take her hand, may be explained to the reader as he himself accounted for it to the young lady herself. He was seated in the shady nook when he overheard a voice say, "*Now tell me your name, young lady, and where you live—and I will prove a friend to you.*" Being familiar with that voice, he leant forward and beheld the Canon in company with a fair young creature whose entire appearance breathed innocence, artless candour, and bashful timidity. Now, from something which Jocelyn knew relative to the character and the proceedings of the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley, he did not for a moment think that the friendship of such an individual could be at all beneficial to the young lady: indeed, he felt assured that such friendship was only proffered with the vilest and basest intentions. Moreover, Jocelyn was so struck by Louisa's appearance that he felt convinced she was all she seemed—an angel of artlessness and purity as well as of loveliness: and hence was it that in obedience to the sudden impulse of his generous nature and chivalric disposition, he at once sprang forward to rescue her from the insidious wiles and serpent-like duplicity of the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

Such was the explanation of Jocelyn's proceedings: and as Louisa Stanley really felt very ill after the prolonged excitement of the scene with the clergyman and the startling event which had brought it to so abrupt a conclusion, she did not hesitate to accept the proffered escort of her new acquaintance as far as her own home. On reaching the garden-wicket he paused and with the most delicate courtesy took his leave—but not without having solicited permission to call and inquire after the young lady's health on the following day.

The visit was paid accordingly—and the acquaintance between the young couple was improved. Jocelyn, who knew more of the world than Louisa had ever dreamt of, but who was still altogether unspoilt and uncontaminated by that experience, was as much amazed as delighted to discover that in the little secluded Eden of that picturesque spot an angel dwelt. His acquaintance with the female sex had hitherto been confined to the sphere of fashion and wealth; and in the splendid saloons of the palatial mansions belonging to the British aristocracy, had he seen enough to render him suspicious and mistrustful of the feminine character generally. But now he discovered that it was quite possible for a divine beauty, a sweet temper, an intellectual disposition, and an artless soul, to blend their attractions and combine their fascinations so as to form a being as adorably faultless as any creation of the romancist's or poet's fancy.

The visit, then, which Jocelyn Loftus paid to inquire after Louisa's health was not the last and only call which he made at the cottage. He solicited permission to return another day—and the young maiden knew no reason why she should object. He *did* return, therefore: and this second visit led to a third—and the third to a fourth—and so on. By degrees, as they grew more familiar—or rather, better acquainted—they walked together in the garden; and in a short time Jocelyn began to assist Louisa in tending the shrubs and tying up the flowers. Then he brought some fresh plants which he procured from a neighbouring nursery-ground; and he set them with his own hands—the first time in his life that he had ever done such a thing!

He was a good musician—and they played and sang together: for the cottage contained a piano—it having been already stated that the aunt had spared no expense consistent with her humble means, in order to give her nieces an excellent education and teach them all lady-like accomplishments. Jocelyn was a good draughtsman as well as musician: and he aided Louisa in her drawings. Then, as their intimacy thus progressed, he brought her some new music and some beautiful prints: and when he proffered these gifts,—such gifts as she might accept with the strictest propriety,—it was with the same delicacy that pervaded the entire tenour of his conduct towards the lovely girl. Indeed, had she been his sister, his behaviour could not have been characterised by attentions more creditable to his own noble nature, or better calculated to secure the esteem and win the good opinion of the purest-minded maiden.

Thus did a few weeks pass away. In the interval Louisa and Clara were constantly corresponding with each other; and the younger sister frankly and ingenuously narrated to the elder all the details of her progressing acquaintance with Jocelyn Loftus. Clara, in her letters from London, gently and delicately insinuated, rather than positively and directly enjoined, the necessity of Louisa's adopting all possible caution with regard to this acquaintance. A passage from one of her letters will show how she touched upon the matter:—

"With regard to Mr. Loftus, my dearest Louisa, I cannot possibly see any harm in your continuing to receive his visits—since you speak of him in terms which prove to me that he is a good, well-meaning, and honourable young man. You give me such ample details relative to those visits and all that passes on the occasion, that I am competent to judge of them as fully as if I myself were present. There is much in the behaviour of Mr. Loftus which commends him to my esteem, and makes me long to know him. The fact that he invariably calls in the middle of the day, at a time when you may be reasonably supposed to be disengaged, is delicate and thoughtful on his part. I should be less pleased if he ever presented himself at the cottage in the evening, when you are more particularly occupied with the attentions needed by our afflicted aunt. I am also charmed to perceive that he has never thought of requesting permission to become the companion of your walks—and that when he has once or twice met you in the streets of Canterbury, he has merely stopped to address you for a few moments and not offered to accompany you. All this bespeaks on his part a due appreciation of the delicate courtesy which a young unmarried gentleman is bound to pay towards a young unmarried lady. That he has never accepted any refreshment when you have offered it, is another proof, however trivial it may appear, of his thorough good-breeding—or, what is better still, of his

refined propriety of conduct. In a word, it is quite evident that he treats you with the high consideration due to your unprotected and almost lonely position: he adopts the delicate bearing of a brother or sincere friend—and all his proceedings are stamped with the evidence of a settled purpose to merit your good opinion. I am certain, on the other hand, that you, my darling Louisa, will so comport yourself as to deserve his good opinion in return."

A short time after Clara had written the letter in which the above passage occurred, she addressed another epistle to her sister in the following terms:—

"London, September 10th, 1814.

"You mentioned, my dearest Loo, in your affectionate letter of the 7th instant, that Mr. Loftus had solicited you to furnish him with my address in London; and you wondered for what purpose he could possibly require it. But the same post which brought me that letter of yours, in which you record the incident, likewise brought me one from Mr. Loftus. And now, my darling Louisa, before I tell you what Mr. Loftus has said to me in his letter, permit me to congratulate you most sincerely—most ardently—most enthusiastically, upon having formed such an acquaintance. He is the very impersonation of honour, generosity, and manly delicacy; and you ought to love him—nay, I am sure that you *do* love, although perhaps this feeling is as yet unsuspected on your part.

"And now for the letter which Jocelyn Loftus has addressed to me. He begins by saying that inasmuch as our aunt is incapacitated by her afflictions from listening to him, and as I am your elder sister, he deems it right to solicit my permission before he whispers a certain communication in your ears. He represents to me that his parents have long been dead—that he belongs to an excellent family—that he is entirely his own master—and that he possesses an income of six hundred pounds a-year. As a proof of his pecuniary position he refers me to his banker; and I have just ascertained that his statement is perfectly correct. Moreover, the banker speaks admirably of him. Thus far, then, everything is in Jocelyn's favour; and it is for you to judge, my dear Louisa, whether his temper, disposition, and personal appearance be agreeable to you. I am sure that you will answer in the affirmative. In plain terms, then, Mr. Loftus desires my permission to make you a proposal of marriage: he says that he has now known you for nearly two months, and that although

the interval be short, yet it has proved quite long enough to make him acquainted with all *your* good qualities, and convince him that he cannot be happy without you. I have written him an answer by this same post, to the effect that I feel honoured by the compliment he has paid me in thus frankly and candidly explaining his social position and desiring my sanction to his suit; and I have added that so far as I am concerned, it would afford me the utmost happiness to behold my sister the wife of such a man. The matter, therefore, now rests with you, my Louisa—for I have do doubt that Jocelyn will immediately open his mind to you.

"With regard to myself, I am happy and comfortable: but Mr. and Mrs. Beckford will not part with me. Indeed, at present, I see no chance of their allowing me to return home. They talk of adopting me and leaving me all their fortune—and as you, my dear Louisa, will soon be comfortably settled and handsomely provided for, I must of course look after myself. Jocelyn tells me in his letter that should he be fortunate enough to see his fondest hopes realised by becoming your husband, he will take you and aunt to a beautiful house which he possesses in a northern county, and where you shall still be enabled to continue your kind attentions towards our afflicted relative. In fact, his forethought is in every way most generous—most honourable—most affectionate.

"God bless you, dearest Loo: and once more accept the sincerest congratulations of your loving sister,

"CLARA STANLEY."

The reader has already been informed that the Canterbury postman was in the habit of passing the cottage at about ten o'clock;—and it was therefore at that hour, in the morning of the 11th of September, that Louisa Stanley received her sister's long and interesting communication. And truly it revealed to her—or at all events gave her the full explanation of the feeling which she cherished in her heart relative to Jocelyn Loftus! Yes—she now knew that she loved him—the key to the solution of the mystery of her own sensations had been afforded her—and it was as if a light had suddenly blazed up in her soul, illuminating that innermost sanctuary into whose depths her mental vision had been unable to penetrate before!

But we said that it was ten o'clock when she received her sister's letter—and in about a couple of hours Jocelyn would call. Unless indeed he should come even earlier than usual: and she fancied—yes, and secretly *hoped*—that he might. Then, as she felt herself thus hoping, she caught herself blushing likewise at the same time;—and from that instant she perceived that the sweetness of this nascent love of her's was mingling with every thought—penetrating every emotion—lending its inspiration as it were to every feeling—imparting radiance to every smile and tenderness to every sigh!

Oh! the exquisite bliss—the purity—the chastity of a young virgin's love! Calling forth all the music of her soul—teaching her that profound and ineffable idolatry in which the youthful heart only can be a worshipper—leading her to live amidst bright realities and far brighter dreams—conjuring up those exquisite imaginings that tinge with such roseate hues the pathway of the future—idealizing the most refined image of the heavenly passion—seeming boundless, illimitable, infinite as a rich incense that fills the earth to the very vaults of heaven with its exquisite perfume—bathing all the senses in a fount of bliss, till existence itself seems to melt away into oblivion,—such is the young maiden's first love!

Yes—and it appears as if the spirit of a celestial melody poured its effluence into her soul, attuning all her feelings—all her thoughts—all her emotions, to this passion so new to her! And within the final realms of the heart, as the mental vision looks deeply inward, the image of the loved one is found impressed:—and the mind experiences bliss in the thought that it cherishes a deathless sentiment. Oh! how the fancy disports and gambols, on unwearied wing, in the paradise of its own creation! For such is Love, in the infancy of its passion: 'tis the golden-hued honey which Providence has placed upon the brims of life's bitter cup;—and the heart feels as if it must perish were the spell that enthrals it to be no more!

We said that Louisa—the young, the charming, the beauteous Louisa—both fancied and hoped that Jocelyn *might* come a little before his usual hour: and she was not disappointed. He had received Clara's letter—he had obtained the elder sister's sanction to his suit—and he felt assured that he should not have to plead in vain at the feet of the gentle Louisa.

It was not much past eleven in the forenoon when he arrived at the cottage. The maiden was in the garden—and she sped to open the wicket. But how her hand trembled and how sweetly confused did she look as she thus gave admittance to her admirer, whose handsome countenance was radiant with hope, and love, and triumph. For he saw by Louisa's manner that Clara had communicated with her upon the *one* absorbing topic: and as this was *his* first love also, he experienced a joy ineffable, as the blush upon her damask cheek already gave the answer to his suit!

We shall not detail the conversation which now took place between them as they insensibly sought the shadiest part of the garden. Suffice it to say that Jocelyn Loftus told his tale of love with all the eloquence which usually marks such tale, even though when told for the first time: and, animated with a blushing joy, did the young virgin listen in a confusion sweeter and more charming than any she had yet displayed. Then, on being pressed to give utterance to the response that was to confirm all the fond expectations and ratify the hopes of her lover, with downcast looks did she murmur the monosyllable which falls in such a case with so delicious a music upon the ear and sinks down with so exquisite a thrill of pleasure into the heart.

Yes! The word was spoken—nor did she wish it recalled. And now for the first time did Jocelyn venture to glide his arm around that sylph-like form and press those lips that were until that moment virgin of the kiss of man. Blushing and trembling, the maiden received the caress that ratified the vows pledged to her by the devoted and adoring Jocelyn: and then how proud—oh! how proud did he feel in the consciousness that he owned the love and possessed the heart whose pure feelings now shone in sweet irradiation upon that angelic countenance!

For some hours did they rove together in the garden—those hours gliding away as if they were only minutes: and then they parted—but with smiles, because they knew that they should soon meet again. And on the morrow they thus met—and for the two or three days following in the same manner: and on the fourth day Jocelyn no longer refused to remain and partake of the frugal repast

with Louisa. But he stayed also to tea;—and in the evening they sate in the garden and conversed upon all the topics that were now so dear to them.

His arm clasped her waist—and her dark tresses fell in rich clusters upon his shoulders. But not an impure thought—not an unholy desire marred the divinity of that bliss which the young man experienced: while innocent happiness beamed in Louisa's eyes—those eyes that seemed so much of heaven's own blessed light brought down to earth!

And it was as they were thus seated in the seclusion of a shady arbour, unconscious of all that was passing elsewhere—absorbed in their own delicious dream of love—that through the hedge ferocious eyes were glaring upon them,—eyes in which devouring desires mingled with an intense envy and a burning hate.

For Bernard Audley, the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral, was watching them thus: and retreating after a while as noiselessly and as unobserved as he had approached the verdant barrier, he muttered with a concentrated bitterness of tone and a look of desperate resolve, "By heaven! she shall yet be mine—she shall be mine!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE FOUR SISTERS.

THE incidents contained in the two preceding chapters, which have been devoted to the charming Louisa, fill up the interval that had elapsed from the separation of the sisters in the middle of August, and bring down that portion of the narrative to the middle of September.

We must now therefore take a temporary leave of the cottage in the vicinage of Canterbury, and transport our readers to the mansion of Mrs. Owen at Richmond.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning, the day after the visit of the Prince of Wales and the Marquis of Leveson to that lady's abode, that we shall find the three eldest sisters—Agatha, Emma, and Julia—assembled in the back drawing-room. The weather was charming—the windows were open—and while the two last-named girls were gazing forth upon the beautiful prospect which the casement commanded, Agatha was lounging in an indolent manner upon a cushion which she had thrown on the carpet. In this attitude of complete abandonment she turned over the pages of an album in which the Prince Regent had himself written a few lines of tolerable poetry, and which also contained effusions from the pens of several personages more distinguished for their great names than their great talents.

As for Mary, the youngest sister—she was closetted at that moment with her mother, in this lady's own chamber; and from the observations which passed between the three girls in the drawing-room, it was evident that the circumstance was a source of much interest and speculation with them.

"I wonder whether mamma is giving Mary precisely the same lecture which she has already bestowed on each of us in our turns," said Emma, with an arch smile, full of wicked meaning.

"I suppose she will tell Mary how far to go and where she must stop short," observed Julia, laughing.

"And it is to be hoped that she will follow that advice as well as we have done," said Agatha, looking up from her recumbent position on the carpet and smiling with even a more charming wickedness than either of her sisters.

"Hush!" whispered Emma as footsteps approached the door.

The next moment Mary, the youngest girl, entered the room. Emma and Julia bounded towards her—and Agatha, rising from the floor, also advanced and joined the group.

Mary was pale and agitated: she even looked as if she had been frightened—and her young bosom was rising and falling with rapid palpitations. The reader will be pleased to recollect that she was only sixteen—whereas Agatha, the eldest girl, was twenty-two. Emma and Julia were respectively twenty and eighteen.

"Well, Mary dear—what has mamma been saying to you?" inquired her three sisters, all as it were in the same breath. "But come and sit down and tell us everything."

"Oh! I dare say you are enlightened enough upon the subject," exclaimed the young girl petulantly, as her sisters led her to the sofa and placed themselves around her: and as she spoke, her eyes filled with tears and her cheeks burnt with crimson blushes.

"Calm your agitation, Mary—get rid of this excitement," said Agatha, in a soothing tone. "We can pretty well guess what our mother has been whispering in your ears—and depend upon it, the advice is good."

"But it took me so much by surprise," murmured Mary, in a broken and tremulous tone: "and it seems to have left upon my mind a feeling as if I had experienced a shock——"

"Which feeling will speedily wear off, my love," said Agatha.

"But since you knew all this," exclaimed Mary, looking reproachfully upon her three sisters, "why did you never drop me a hint or whisper a word in my ears, so as to prepare me for the extraordinary lessons which I have just received—and from the lips of my own mother too?"

"Mamma is a woman of the world, you see, Mary," replied Agatha; "and she is resolved that her daughters shall be women of the world also. You blame us for our reserve towards you on certain particulars—but it was not for us to undertake the task of initiation. Had we babbled prematurely and gossipped with you as you seem to think we ought to have done, we should have neglected one of the principal lessons that mamma taught us and which has no doubt been duly impressed upon your mind within the last hour."

"Yes—duplicity," exclaimed Mary, with a bitterness of tone and an agitation of manner. "Henceforth I am to use all those smiles and all that gaiety which until now were the free and spontaneous ebullition of spirits naturally buoyant and a disposition unaffectedly cheerful,—I am to use those smiles and that gaiety, I repeat, as a veil to cover selfishness, hypocrisy, artifice, and deceit. Oh! I am to exist as a living lie—a breathing falsehood—an animated cheat—the impersonation of untruth——"

"And what will you gain by all the ingenuousness, frankness, and artlessness in the world?" demanded Agatha. "Think you, my poor girl, that the dry bread moistened with the tears of suffering virtue is very palatable?—or will you not agree with us that it is better to enjoy luxuries of every kind, though pur-

chased at some sacrifice of the better feelings which nature has implanted within us?"

"It may be so," observed Mary, her agitation subsiding and yielding to thoughtfulness: then, after a long pause, she said, "I have no doubt that I shall soon think as you do: but at first it is painful—yes, very painful to receive such lessons and be enjoined to pursue such a course of training. 'Tis the same as if a beautiful picture on which the eye was gazing with rapturous admiration, suddenly changed into an assemblage of loathsome reptiles."

"And did you positively believe, Mary, that the world was so fair a scene?" inquired Agatha.

"How could I think otherwise?" asked the young girl, with a profound sigh. "Mamma never opened her lips upon the subject until to-day—you were all three equally reserved——"

"And you, Mary," interrupted Agatha, "were very short-sighted."

"Yes—I was indeed!" said the young girl, mournfully. "But now my eyes are fully opened—and I perceive that for some time past I have been going through a course of preparatory training without suspecting it. In fact," she added, with quivering lips and burning cheeks, "the very sports and pastimes which I looked upon as so innocent, have been purposely intended to undermine all delicacy of feeling—all rectitude of principle——"

"And now you are going to whine again and whimper, like a great school-girl," exclaimed Emma, sharply.

"Silly thing that you are!" added Julia, still more angrily.

"You are wrong thus to upbraid poor Mary," said Agatha, speaking to the two young ladies in a tone of rebuke. "Let us argue with her—and not scold. Remember, Miss Emma, that you were alarmed and frightened at first—and you, Miss Julia, were as much shocked as Mary is now——"

"Well, Mary will forgive us for a momentary unkindness," exclaimed Emma and Julia, embracing their youngest sister, who threw her arms around their necks and sobbed and wept as she kissed them tenderly.

"And now, my dear girl," said Agatha,, "tell us all that our mother has been whispering in your ears, so that we may understand to what extent her explanations have gone."

"I do not know whether I can arrange all the details of mamma's discourse in consecutive order," replied Mary, endeavouring to compose her feelings as well as she was able: "but the purport of it has necessarily made such an impression upon my mind, that I can never forget it. First, however, I should observe that it never struck me until this morning that there was anything remarkable or strange in the intimacy which subsists between the Princes and our family: I had never given the subject a thought. For the last three or four years I have been accustomed to see them visit the house and treat us all in the most friendly manner—and on no occasion did I think of asking myself the meaning of this intimacy. Then the pastimes and recreations—the blindman's buff, hunt the slipper, and kiss-in-the-ring—all the familiarities, in fine——"

"Were naturally looked upon by you as innocent and meaningless," observed Agatha.

"Yes," replied Mary: "whereas the whole routine has been part and parcel of a means systematically adopted to inure our minds to every species of levity short of actual frailty," added the young girl, her cheeks once more suffused with the burning blushes of shame.

Agatha, Emma, and Julia exchanged rapid and significant looks;—and then the eldest again encouraged Mary to proceed with her explanation of what had passed between Mrs. Owen and herself.

"Having hitherto entertained such innocent impressions relative to the visits of the Princes and the amusements in which we indulged with them," continued Mary, "I was astonished when I just now heard from mamma's lips that the whole was a deliberate and preconceived system adopted for the purpose of training our minds into a particular course. Nor less was I amazed and afflicted, when my own mother began to explain to me how the path to fortune lay through the realms of duplicity and deceit, and not through the regions of frankness and rectitude. Oh! to me these doctrines appeared detestable and abhorrent, especially when coming from the lips of a mother! But, then, as she herself assured me, she is a woman of the world—and had she pursued a course perfectly consistent with the dictates of her conscience, she would be a pauper in a workhouse or a mendicant in the streets, with her four daughters famishing around her. She adopted another career—she sacrificed her better feelings—she yielded to circumstances—or rather she flung herself with complete abandonment upon the tide of events;—and the results may be recognised in the ease, comfort, and even luxury in which she has lived and reared her children. The lessons wherein she has this day initiated me, have therefore been to the effect that wealth is the grand aim which I must ever keep in view—and that in order to reach it, I must hesitate at no meanness, no selfishness, no falsehood, no duplicity! I am to bear in mind that it is better to become the mistress of a rich man than the wife of a poor one—that splendid guilt is not guilt at all, but that virtuous poverty is the greatest of crimes. I am to accustom myself to the familiarities, the caresses, and the toyings of the Princes, in order to be enabled to keep a constant control and mastery over my passions—so that by inuring myself to all that may excite the feelings and play upon the senses, I may with ease offer resistance when it does not suit my selfish interests to surrender my virtue. I am to become a thorough hypocrite in everything—to be ready in the adoption of any artifice that may serve my purposes—to be able to smile upon an enemy if need be—and to lavish the tenderest caresses upon any one whom it may suit me to ruin. In fine, I am so to discipline all my passions, all my feelings, all my emotions, that they shall become my slaves and not my masters—that they shall be rendered subservient to my purposes, instead of exercising any influence over my destiny,—so that when I err, it may not be through weakness, but deliberately and intentionally on my side—and when I appear to be succumbing in the melting mood of woman's natural tenderness, I shall in reality be only playing a part in which my passions have not the slightest sympathy. I am to resemble the proficient actress upon the stage, who can call up tears—wreathe her countenance into beaming smiles—bestow or receive the most passionate caresses—burst into sudden indignation—relapse into winning softness—faint, swoon—laugh or pray—and all this at a moment's warning and without an effort!"

"Such has been the substance of our mother's lec-

ture, Mary?" said Agatha, who, as well as Emma and Julia, had listened with deep attention and interest to the young girl's explanation. "Well—and you will follow it to the very letter? For doubtless our mother did not forget to tell you that she is not the only parent who brings up her daughters with these ideas, although there are not many mothers perhaps who go so far as to inculcate them positively and directly by means of words. The training to which we are thus subjected, is precisely that which prevails throughout the world of fashion, where everything is false—heartless—hollow—selfish. Generally speaking, however, aristocratic, titled, and wealthy mothers rear their children in this manner, without having the courage or the frankness to explain the real motives of such unnatural training. Our mother has displayed that courage and that frankness. She says, '*Such has been the training, and such are the uses to which you must put it.*' She has not left us to find out as best we may the meaning and the purport of this artificial education. Whatever she may be in the presence of the world, she is not a hypocrite with her own children. In fine, she has already carved out for us a certain career on which we are immediately to enter ——"

"And which explains the cause of the visits and intimacy of the Princes at our house," observed Mary. "Mamma did not fail to tell me this much."

"You know, then, for what service we are destined?" said Agatha, inquiringly. "But I see that you do ——"

"Yes," responded the young girl. "And I think that I can now give you a piece of intelligence, which mamma will doubtless communicate to you presently. For a letter arrived while I was closetted with her just now ——"

"A letter of importance?" exclaimed the three eldest sisters, all speaking together and with intense eagerness. "From Windsor?"

"Yes—from the Queen," answered Mary.

"Oh! I am glad to hear this!" cried Agatha, her countenance becoming radiant with joy.

"And do you know, dear Mary, whether it is all settled?" inquired Julia.

"I believe so," rejoined the youngest sister. "At all events, mamma is going up to London to see the Prince Regent presently; and she hopes that when she returns home in the afternoon she will bring word that we are to prepare for immediate departure."

"What a pity," exclaimed Emma, "that the Queen's letter did not arrive yesterday: mamma would then have been able to communicate it to the Prince when he was here last night ——"

"Well, a few hours more or less will not make much difference," observed Agatha: "but it is certainly high time that we should enter upon this career for which we have been destined for three or four years past."

"Better late than never," said Emma. "Oh! how we shall enjoy ourselves!" she added, clapping her hands in an effusion of glee.

"And what new scenes we shall behold!" cried Julia.

"And how agreeable it will be to receive the recompense for our services at the end of the time!" said Agatha.

"But such services as they are!" exclaimed Mary, with a shudder, as she flung affrighted looks upon her three sisters. "Oh! would it not be better for those who are about to employ us,—would it not be better, I ask, to send four venomous snakes at once——"

"Hush!" ejaculated Agatha, with mingled sternness and petulance. "Just now I took your part when your sisters were harsh with you, Mary: but I cannot permit you to talk in this manner. Perish all compunction when a fortune is to be made!" she added energetically.

"Yes—such also must be my motto, I perceive," murmured the young girl, with a voice and manner expressive of that resignation which is akin to despair.

And then her three sisters, seeing that it was useless to chide her for what they termed her "weakness," addressed themselves to the task of consoling and encouraging her.

CHAPTER XII.

TUESDAY: OR, THE SECOND SUITOR.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon; and Venetia Trelawney was seated in her drawing-room at Acacia Cottage.

She was alone—elegantly dressed—and apparently expecting a visitor: for she was neither reading nor working, nor yet amusing herself with the birds—and every time a vehicle was passing in the road she listened to hear if it stopped at her dwelling.

The windows on that side were shut: but those overlooking the park were open, as on the previous day—and the sunbeams that penetrated through the curtains, shone on her superb auburn hair and made it glow like velvet of golden tissue. The slight flush of expectation was upon her cheeks: but from her manner it did not appear that she anticipated either pleasure or pain from the visit thus awaited;—it was merely the little excitement produced by a resolve to play a particular part, and the anxiety to accomplish it with success.

She looked at the time-piece on the mantel—then at her watch—and she found that they corresponded in proclaiming the hour to be three o'clock. Then she rose from her seat—took a perfumed billet from a vase—and ran her eyes over the contents, which were as follow:—

"*Mount Street, Berkeley Square,*
"*September 17th,* 1814.

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon presents his compliments to Miss Trelawney; and having yesterday purchased a small estate at Knightsbridge, consisting of a few houses, of which Acacia Cottage is one, Sir Douglas contemplates certain improvements in the property. But as he would on no account make any alteration which might be disagreeable to Miss Trelawney, whom he is proud and happy thus to enumerate amongst his tenants, he would feel infinitely obliged if Miss Trelawney would favour him with a few moments' interview this day. Sir Douglas will therefore take the liberty of paying his respects to Miss Trelawney between two and three o'clock in the afternoon."

"Yes—his appointment is specific enough," murmured Venetia to herself, as she threw back the note into the porcelain vase: "but doubtless he considers it fashionable and consistent with good taste to be the least thing late!"

Scarcely had she made this reflection to herself, when a handsome carriage drove up to the door—and in a few moments the serious-looking old livery-ser-

vant ushered Sir Douglas Huntingdon into the drawing-room.

We have already stated that the baronet, who was about six or seven and twenty years of age, was naturally good-looking, but that his appearance was rendered somewhat sickly by dissipation. He dressed with as much taste as elegance; his manners were prepossessing—and he was endowed with considerable intellectual powers, if he chose to exert them.

Venetia was standing when he entered the room; and having requested him to be seated on a chair which she indicated with a graceful motion of the arm, she placed herself on a sofa at some little distance.

With one rapid glance she surveyed the baronet from head to foot—and the reflection which passed through her mind, was, "He is exactly as he was described to me." On the other hand, Sir Douglas Huntingdon swept his eyes over Venetia's entire form, embracing every beauty in that first look: and the reflection which passed through *his* mind, was, "She is more exquisitely charming than I had even fancied from seeing her at a distance!"

Be it remembered that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was the gentleman who, at the Marquis of Léveson's table a few days previously, had told the anecdote of the blank chèque sent by a certain Duke to Venetia, and returned to his Grace by the young lady without a syllable of comment,—which anecdote the dissipated baronet had narrated as an argument in favour of a previous assertion that he had made, to the effect that Miss Trelawney was "as virtuous as she was incomprehensible." We only remind the reader of these little circumstances in order to show the opinion that Sir Douglas Huntingdon entertained of the young lady, of whom he was in reality desperately enamoured and in whose presence he had now found means to introduce himself.

"You will pardon the liberty which I have taken in thus enacting the cold and formal part of a landlord towards a tenant," began the baronet, with a half smile: "whereas the more fitting vocation would have been that of a worshipper at the shrine of beauty——"

"And if you had to grant me a lease or sign a deed of sale with respect to Acacia Cottage," interrupted Venetia, with mingled archness and irony, "should you insert compliments and flatteries in the document?"

"The only proper compliment in such a case," returned the baronet, "would be to make the document a deed of gift."

"Well, if you intend to call at every one of your newly-purchased houses and behave to each tenant in the same liberal manner," observed Venetia, with the utmost readiness of repartee, "I am afraid that your property will prove but a bad bargain."

"But if my proposal were a mere exception in your favour, Miss Trelawney?"

"Oh! in that case I should refuse it, because I could not think of exciting the envy of my neighbours."

"They need know nothing of the matter," said the baronet, smiling.

"A generous action should never be kept secret," answered Venetia. "But, jesting apart, Sir Douglas Huntingdon—we will proceed to business, if you please. You have purchased the estate on which this house stands—and you are desirous to make improvements? Is it not so?"

"It is, Miss Trelawney," answered the baronet: "and I was anxious to consult your own views and tastes upon the subject——"

"But I am neither skilled as an architect nor in laying out gardens, Sir Douglas," exclaimed Venetia, with a peculiar smile which expressed a good-tempered irony.

"You notwithstanding possess an exquisite taste," observed the baronet, glancing round the well-furnished drawing-room.

"Oh! I will not rob my upholsterer of any of the credit which is wholly and solely due to himself," said Venetia, with that cheerfulness of repartee which constituted so gentle and lady-like a rebuke for any compliments or flatteries that were paid her.

"Are you determined, Miss Trelawney," exclaimed the baronet, laughing, "not to permit me to consult you in this matter?"

"I am so completely indifferent to it, Sir Douglas Huntingdon," was the answer, "that it positively is not worth while. So long as you do not build up the walls of my garden to the height of the house—or brick up the windows—or level the Cottage altogether——"

"Well, Miss Trelawney," cried the baronet, still laughing gaily, "if you do not choose to regard my visit in a business-like point of view, I can assure you that I am all the more contented—indeed, all the happier. I would much sooner enjoy the privilege of calling upon you as an acquaintance—in the hope that I might some day be regarded as a friend——"

"As for friendship, Sir Douglas Huntingdon," interrupted Venetia, "I am afraid that its realities have long ago been absorbed in what may be termed the artificialities of fashionable life and worldly pursuits."

"Oh! Miss Trelawney," exclaimed her visitor, "you cannot possibly be sceptical with regard to the existence of a pure and disinterested friendship."

"But it does not spring up as a matter of course, just because two individuals come to a verbal agreement upon the subject," replied Venetia, in a tone of gentle sarcasm.

"The earnest, sincere, and enthusiastic devotion of one individual towards another, must inevitably beget a reciprocal feeling in the heart of the latter," said the baronet.

"My reading has never taught me such a faith," remarked Miss Trelawney, affecting to consider the subject seriously for a few moments.

"I will admit that my observation applied rather to love than to friendship," rejoined the baronet, surveying the beauteous creature with a look of tender significance.

"Oh! what singular digressions our discourse is taking," cried Venetia, in a tone of good-tempered raillery. "A landlord calls upon his tenant for the avowed purpose of talking on houses and gardens—and he enlightens her mind with a homily upon friendship and love."

"Because the fair tenant herself inspires the subject," returned the baronet: then, before Venetia had time to utter a single syllable in response, he said, "Miss Trelawney, I wish to be candid with you—will you pardon me for the frankness that is about to characterise my speech?"

"Is it concerning the houses and the gardens?" she inquired, with an admirable affectation of ingenuousness and *naiveté*.

"Oh! pray do not dwell any longer upon that horrid

business-topic," exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a tone of entreaty: "or rather, if we must speak of my estates and my property, let it be only in this manner—that I am prepared to lay all my fortune at your feet!"

"You have already offered me Acacia Cottage as a gift," said Venetia, with a blush and a smile; "and now you propose to confer all your possessions upon me. Such unusual liberality—from an entire stranger——"

"Do not mistake me, I implore you," interrupted Sir Douglas, eagerly. "I intend to base my offer upon terms to which you may at least listen without anger——"

"And those terms?" said Venetia, with an air of mingled amazement and incredulity.

"Marriage, adored one!" exclaimed the baronet, falling upon his knees in her presence.

"Rise, sir—rise—this is too ridiculous," said Venetia, with that tone and manner of dignified and at the same time good-tempered rebuke which showed that she did not think it worth while to take the matter in a particularly serious light, nor to invest it with any undue importance. "You are evidently a good-natured, well-meaning man—and I cannot find it in my heart to be positively vexed with you. But——"

"But you do not think that I am serious?" exclaimed the baronet, rising from his suppliant posture and looking very crest-fallen.

"If I did not suppose you to be serious in offering me marriage," said Miss Trelawney, now speaking with all the dignity which woman knows so well how to assume and which becomes her so loftily,—"I should spurn you with indignation and order my lacquey to eject you from my presence. But as I *do* believe you to be serious in making me an honourable proposal, I can only reject it with politeness—at the same time begging you to observe how silly and ridiculous it is to take such a step after an acquaintance of precisely twenty-five minutes:"—and Venetia glanced towards the or-molu clock on the mantelpiece as she uttered these last words.

"Miss Trelawney," said the baronet, to whose cheeks, before so pale, had rushed the crimson glow of mortification and bitter disappointment,—"you are not so much a stranger to me as you may imagine. 'Tis true that I have never spoken to you until this day: but I have seen you—I have admired you from a distance—and—and—I love you."

"But, unfortunately, my dear sir, I do not love you in return," answered Venetia, evidently resolved to treat the matter with a good-tempered raillery: "and therefore we must consider the topic at an end. Now, I am not angry with you—I shall not mention this silly proceeding elsewhere, so as to make a laughing-stock of you——"

"Oh! I thank you for this kind consideration on your part!" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, with bitterness of tone: then, instantaneously repenting of the unwarrantable ebullition of anger, he said, "But indeed I ought to thank you sincerely and unfeignedly, Miss Trelawney——"

"You are reasonable, Sir Douglas, and will view the affair in its proper light," interrupted Venetia. "What complexion, then, does it assume? A gentleman of whom I know nothing, writes to me upon a matter of business—in fact, he announces to me that he has suddenly become my landlord. I cannot refuse to grant him the audience which he craves. He comes—he throws himself at my feet—and offers marriage. There are but two ways to treat him—either with anger, or with indulgence. I prefer the latter course, and I adopt it—in the hope that he will take his departure in a friendly manner and come near me no more. Now, Sir Douglas, have I made myself intelligible?"

"You have—too intelligible, Miss Trelawney," answered the baronet, not knowing how to act and scarcely what to say. "But am *I* to understand that you henceforth debar me the privilege of paying my respects to you occasionally?"

"Your visits cannot be agreeable to me after what has just passed," rejoined Venetia: "and I should also imagine that you yourself will feel no inclination to renew them."

"But is it impossible that I can ever make a favourable impression upon you?" inquired the baronet.

"Quite impossible, I can assure you," returned Venetia, laughing, as she leant against the mantelpiece—for she had risen from the sofa when her visitor threw himself upon his knees, and she had remained standing in order to discourage a prolongation of the interview.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon hesitated—and his confusion therefore became absolutely painful.

"You will order your doors to be closed against me?" he said, with a nervous quivering of the lip.

"I should hope that your good taste will render no such extreme measure necessary," answered Venetia, in a tone of dignified remonstrance.

"You are really very kind—very forbearing—very good-tempered," exclaimed Sir Douglas, now laughing in order to escape from the embarrassment and awkwardness of his position; "and it would be unpardonable on my side to do or say aught that may anger you. I shall therefore take my departure."

Thus speaking, the baronet made a low bow and quitted the room.

"I love her to desperation," he thought within himself, as he returned to his carriage, which was in attendance. "But how to possess her either as wife or mistress—aye, that is the question!"

The carriage was about to drive away, when a loud voice called out in a commanding tone for the coachman to stop—and the head of the redoubtable Captain Tash was immediately afterwards thrust in at the window.

"How are you, my dear Huntingdon? I saw you coming out of Acacia Cottage—and——"

"There, there—that's enough!" said the baronet impatiently. "I suppose you want eighteen-pence or half-a-crown—and here it is."

"By Jove, sir—but I want nothing of the kind!" exclaimed the Captain, affecting a tone and look of the deepest indignation.

"Well, it's the first time that I have ever known you *not* to want a trifle of the kind," said the baronet, laconically: then, as his glance happened to travel across the road, he beheld the Captain's man Robin standing bolt upright against a lamp-post, and apparently as motionless and rigid as the post itself. "By heaven! a thought strikes me!" exclaimed Sir Douglas, his countenance brightening up.

"What is it?" asked Tash.

"Send your man to me this evening, Captain, at nine o'clock," was the response, "and I will give him something to do that shall be well paid for. And now good-bye."

"Robin shall wait upon you punctually," answered Tash. "But when I think of it—if you do happen to have such a thing as a guinea about you——"

"Here it is!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon, tossing the golden coin from the window. "And now tell the coachman to drive on."

The vehicle accordingly rolled away—and Captain Tash, having picked up the guinea, hastened back into the *Green Dragon* public-house, whither he was immediately followed by Robin, who sneaked in like a mongrel dog at the heels of its master.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE KNIFE-GRINDER.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening of the same day on which the preceding incidents took place, that a knife-grinder entered the village of Richmond. He was wheeling his moveable shop before him, and proclaiming his avocation in a voice that was rather piercing and shrill than stentorian and hoarse. In person he was short, thin, and by no means strongly built; and as he was thoroughly begrimed with black, so that he could easily have passed himself off as a negro, had he chosen,—it becomes a matter of difficulty to extend our description to his countenance. As to the real colour of his hair and whiskers or the natural hue of his complexion, these are points on which we cannot possibly undertake to enlighten the reader,—inasmuch as his whole person, from head to foot, including his apparel, which was torn in many places, was as thickly incrusted with soot as if he had never come in contact with clean water since the first day of his knife-grinding avocation. In addition to this pursuit, however, he followed that of mending kettles and bellows, umbrellas and locks—or at all events he said so, and the public took his word for it.

Through Richmond did he slowly wend his way announcing his delectable presence by self-eulogistic vociferations of various kinds.

"Knives and scithors to grind! Here you air, ladies and genelmen, with the paytent double-milled double-distilled mechanism for giving knives so keen a hedge that the wery shadow will cut a slice out of a leg of mutton, and you're obleeged to hold 'em back for fear they should cut too big a slice at von time. Here you air, ladies, with the newly-inwented just diskivered machinery for grinding scithors—making 'em so sharp that they'd cut anything but love asunder in the twinkling of a hi. Knives and scithors to grind, O!"

Then stopping short, the soot-begrimed gentleman set his much-vaunted machinery going by the action of his foot; and the whirr of the wheels mingled with the jagging, grating noise of a piece of iron held tight against the grindstone, whence myriads of sparks flew about in every direction.

"Knives and scithors to grind, O!" again vociferates this indefatigable person. "Surely every von must have a knife that's blunt or a pair of scithors that wants a hedge. If you ha'n't, I shall think that there's no beef eaten and no needle-work done in the pleasing village of Richmond. Kittles to mend!—humberellers to mend! humberellers to mend! Come, now, what lady hasn't got a sarsepan or a kittle that wants a doctoring? This is the shop for the paytent solder Locks to mend—locks to mend!—keys to fit—keys to fit! Knives and scithors to grind, O!—humberellers to mend!"

It did not however seem that the knife-grinder's eloquence produced any grand or startling effect: for he had by this time passed half through Richmond without obtaining a single proof of patronage. Happening to halt in the immediate vicinage of Mrs. Owen's house, he seated himself on the bank which was shaded by that very clump of trees wherein Daniel the Hangman had been concealed on the preceding evening.

Lighting his pipe by means of the fire which he carried in an iron brazier slung to his perambulating mechanism, the knife-grinder smoked with great apparent comfort to himself, despite the slackness of business; and as he lay lounging on the bank, he surveyed Mrs. Owen's house with the air of a man who could enjoy the view of an imposing mansion without at all envying the inmates.

But he had not smoked out his first pipe when he heard a voice exclaim, "Halloa! you knife-grinder and locksmith there!—what a lazy fellow it is!"

"Not at all lazy, when I've got anything to do," said the soot-begrimed individual, as he rose deliberately to his feet. "Now, then—who wants me?"

"I do," said the voice which had previously spoken: and in a few moments a footman in a handsome livery emerged from behind the clump of trees.

"At your service, sir," exclaimed the knife-grinder. "There isn't a thing I can't do to perfection in my bisness——"

"Talking included, I suppose," said the footman.

"I don't talk when I'm paid to hold my tongue, at all events," replied the knife-grinder.

The livery-servant looked him hard in the face, with the evident object of ascertaining if there were anything significant in these words: then, being probably unable to penetrate through such a coat of grime in order to read the expression of the man's countenance, he said, "How do you mean that you don't talk when you're paid to hold your tongue?"

"I mean just what I say — and I hope I've given no offence," answered the knife-grinder.

"Oh! none at all, my man," exclaimed the footman. "I suppose, then, that if you had a job given you here or hereabouts, you wouldn't go blabbing of it in the ale-house or tap-room to-night."

"Lord bless ye, I'm accustomed to them sorts of jobs," said the knife-grinder.

"What sorts of jobs?" demanded the livery-servant, sharply. "I didn't mention any in particular——"

"I know you didn't," said the sooty individual: "but what I meant was that I sometimes do things for genelmen's servants which it don't do to talk about—such as altering the key of one lock to fit another——"

"There—that's enough—and don't speak so loud," interrupted the livery-servant, glancing over his shoulder towards the mansion with the furtive keenness of one who wishes to assure himself that he is not overheard. "I see you are a decent fellow in your way. Where do you come from to-day?"

"From London, master," was the response; "and I'm off into the country as far away as I can go, cos vy——but that don't matter," he observed, suddenly checking himself.

"Ah! I see," said the footman, with a sly expression of countenance; "something you've done up yonder that makes it too hot—eh?"

"Well, I s'pose you ain't far off from the truth," answered the knife-grinder, laughing. "But come—won't you stand a drop of beer after all this long chat?"

"I'll stand a drop of beer and a guinea into the bargain if you'll first do what I want," said the domestic.

"A guinea!" ejaculated the knife-grinder, in a tone of joy and incredulity. "But what's the use of making a fool of a poor devil like me, that hasn't earnt a blessed ha'penny all day long?"

"You shall soon see whether I want to make a fool of you or not," rejoined the footman, displaying a golden coin for a moment from his waistcoat-pocket. "But, in plain terms, can you really and truly alter a key so as to fit a lock to which it doesn't properly belong?"

"I tell ye what it is," answered the knife-grinder, in a low tone and with a sooty look of mysteriousness,—"it often happens that I'm axed by genelmen's servants to do this sort of thing—and it's a wery singular fact, but I've always noticed that wherever I *have* altered a key, the house has invariably been robbed in a most unaccountable manner a few days or weeks arterwards—and what is more, the thieves have never been diskivered."

"Ah! I see," observed the footman, with a semi-smile of deep significancy. "But how long does it take you to alter a key in this manner?"

"There's two answers to that question," said the knife-grinder. "Suppose you give me a common key, and order me to fit it to open all common locks: then I saws and files it away till I makes it a *skeleton*, as we calls it."

"Well, that's one answer!" observed the footman. "Now for the other."

"Suppose you give me two keys and tell me to make *one* just like the *other*," continued the knife-

grinder,—"this work may take a little longer time. But I could do either in an hour, generally speaking."

"That will do. Now wheel your rattle-trap out of the road, behind these trees, and wait till I come back."

Having thus spoken, John the footman hastened back into the house; and in a few minutes he returned with an umbrella and a couple of pairs of scissors in his hands.

"There's our cook's old cotton umbrella which she wants mended," he said: "and these scissors belong to the housemaid and tiring-woman. You'll do them nicely, of course? But these keys," added the footman, in a lower tone, as he produced the articles named, "are mine—and this old rusty one must be made exactly like that new bright one."

"All right—and no questions axed," returned the knife-grinder. "Come back in three-quarters of an hour, and everything shall be done."

John the footman accordingly hurried back into the house; and the knife-grinder fell to work in the field, behind the clump of trees, where he had wheeled his machine. He first ground the scissors, whistling all the time in a free and easy fashion, as if perfectly at ease within himself, despite the little trouble to which he had alluded as the cause of a somewhat precipitate flight from London. Having disposed of the scissors, he sate down and cobbled up the umbrella: and then he examined the keys. They were both small, but of the same size, although utterly dissimilar in respect to the wards; and as the knife-grinder examined the bright key, he muttered to himself, "Ah! this belongs to a patent lock—and a pretty intricate thing it is, too. But I dare say I can manage the business."

Then, opening a drawer which fitted into the frame-work of his machine, he carefully examined a number of keys contained therein. Those keys were of all sorts, shapes, fashions, and sizes; and it seemed impossible that there could be in existence a lock which at least some of them would not open. At length the knife-grinder found amongst the collection a key which exactly corresponded with the bright one which the footman had left with him. As for the old rusty key also placed in his hands by the livery-servant, he tossed it amongst the others in the drawer, which he then shut and carefully fastened.

Having thus easily performed his work, he smoked his pipe until the three-quarters of an hour had elapsed—when John re-appeared from Mrs. Owen's mansion.

"Well, have you finished?" he inquired, anxiously

"If I hadn't, I should still be at work," answered the knife-grinder. "Here's the humbereller—and here's the scithors ——"

"But the keys?" demanded John, with an impatience which he could not subdue.

"Here," returned the knife-grinder. "And now I'll be bound you can't tell me which is the new 'un and which is the old 'un."

"No—may I be hanged if I can!" exclaimed the livery-servant, comparing the two keys with mingled admiration and surprise. "By jingo! you're a clever fellow and a quick workman: why, one would think it must have taken pretty nearly all the time to polish that cursed old rusty key that I gave you—to say nothing about the altering of all the wards."

"You see I'm accustomed to it," observed the knife-grinder, carelessly.

"But I should think you yourself can hardly tell which of these keys was the rusty one," said John.

"I should be a fool if I couldn't diskiver my own work," replied the man, bluntly. "But come—tip us the rhino—I want to be off and get a glass of ale—for this is cussed dry work."

"Well, I won't keep you, my good fellow," said John. "There's the guinea I promised—and here's half-a-crown to pay for the other things and get yourself some ale with."

"Thank'ee kindly, master. And now just tell us where they draw a good drop of beer?"

"Why, the best is at the *King's Arms* yonder," returned the footman. "Good evening."

"Good evening, master," said the knife-grinder: and catching up the handles of his barrow-like machine, he trundled it back into the road, whistling blithely as he went along.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TAP-ROOM.

An hour afterwards — that is to say, at about nine o'clock in the evening — John the footman repaired to the *King's Arms* ale-house. As he passed the bar, he nodded to the landlord with the familiarity of a well-known frequenter of the house; and he was about to enter the tap-room, when a thought struck him and he stopped short.

"Has a knife-grinding fellow been here this evening?" he inquired of the host, who was a stout, jolly-looking man, with an honest countenance and a rubicund complexion.

"Yes—about two hours back, I should think it must be," was the answer. "He only took a glass of ale and went off. But why do you ask?"

"Oh! merely because I wanted the fellow to do some little jobs for me; and as he passed along the road just now I asked him where he was going, and he said to the *King's Arms*. But it's no matter—I suppose he's off on the tramp again.—Is any one in the tap-room?"

"Two persons, I think," answered the landlord: "and one of 'em inquired if you'd been in this evening. I fancy he's the same that I've seen here before in your company."

"Ah! I expected some one—it's all right—an acquaintance of mine," observed John, affecting a careless manner. "Who's the other?"

"I don't know—a country-looking fellow," was the reply. "What shall I bring you in?"

"Ale—a pint of your best," returned John: and having thus given his orders, he passed on and entered the tap-room.

As the landlord had stated, he found two persons there. One was his friend Daniel the Hangman: the other was an individual in a peasant's garb, with a matted shock of light hair, a florid complexion, and a peculiarly stolid look. His age seemed to be midway between thirty and forty; and from his general appearance he was evidently a farm-labourer. He sate in a corner of the room, and was busily engaged in discussing a supper of bread and cheese, which he seasoned

with onions and washed down with copious draughts of ale.

The Hangman was dressed as we have already described him in a previous chapter. His shabby shooting-jacket—his corduroy breeches—his leathern gaiters—his lace-up boots—and his blue cotton neckerchief, all helped to complete the ruffianism of his appearance: while his ghastly countenance and glaring eyes gave him a hideous and spectral air, reminding one of the gholes, or devourers of corpses, that so often figure in oriental tales.

"Well, you see I'm punctual," he said, as John the footman entered the tap-room. "I've been here this quarter of an hour ——"

"And I'm as punctual as I could be, old fellow," replied the servant. "But what news?"

"Oh! all right," was the response: and the Hangman glanced significantly towards the country bumpkin as much as to imply that they must not speak too openly and too plainly before a third party.

"So it came off, then, last night?" said the livery-servant.

"Yes—right as a trivet," answered the Hangman.

"Just as you expected, Dan'el?"

"Just as I expected."

And then the two exchanged looks of deep meaning.

The countryman, having by this time disposed of his meal and drained his pewter-pot, seated himself in the corner for a nap; and the Hangman proceeded to light his pipe—an example that was followed by the footman.

"The young ladies all leave to-morrow," observed the latter, after a pause: "and missus will be alone in the house—that is, with me and the servant-gals."

"Ah! they leave to-morrow, do they?" said the Hangman, as he puffed his pipe: but through the faint blue wreaths of smoke he exchanged another significant look with his companion.

"They take their departure to-morrow morning," continued the latter: then, glancing towards the countryman and perceiving that his eyes were shut, the footman drew a key from his pocket and showed it to the Hangman.

"Good!" muttered this individual, his countenance expressing great satisfaction.

"I got it from a rascal of a travelling tinker or knife-grinder," said John, in a low tone, as he returned the key to his pocket. "The fellow is clever at his business——"

Now the country bumpkin in the corner began to snore: and both the Hangman and the livery-servant continued to smoke in silence for a few minutes.

"He's fast asleep," at length observed Daniel, in an under tone.

"Fast as a church," replied the footman. "Come, hand me over my regulars, old fellow—for I suppose you've got the golden boys about your precious person."

"Here's ten guineas—and ten you've had in advance, makes up twenty for your regulars in last night's job," said the Hangman, as he counted down the coin.

"Thank'ee. And so the thing went off all comfortable—eh?" inquired the footman, as he dropt the ten guineas into his waistcoat pocket.

"Nothing could be better. The Prince and the Marquis didn't bluster or ride rusty a bit," continued the Hangman. "They submitted to circumstances in a way very creditable to themselves," he added, with a low chuckling laugh: "and I'll stake my existence that they couldn't suspect where they were taken to. But wasn't it a rum lark altogether?"

"From what you told me beforehand about it, I should say it was," returned the footman. "But tell us all the particulars, Daniel."

"Not now—another time," answered the Hangman. "We've got something else to talk about at present. I suppose that fellow's really asleep?" he added glancing towards the countryman in the corner.

"If he isn't, he shams snoring uncommon well," replied John. "But of course he is."

"Well, then, what about this little business over the way?" asked the Hangman. "You say that all your young missusses are going off to-morrow—and you've got a duplicate key?"

"Just so. It was the luckiest chance in the world that sent the knife-grinding fellow through Richmond to-day," continued the footman: "for I was thinking at the moment how the devil I should manage it, when I heard the rascal bawling out all kinds of nonsense about locks to mend and keys to fit."

"And you happened to have *the* key in your hand at the time, I suppose?" observed the Hangman.

"Exactly so. You recollect, when I first hinted at the little affair," proceeded John, "I told you that every now and then there's a regular clean out of the great iron safe where the plate is kept—and while it's being cleaned and counted up I have the key in my hands: but the moment the plate's put back again, I have to give up the key to missus again. She keeps a devilish sharp look-out, I can tell you!"

"So I suppose—with such a valuable lot of plate in her possession," observed the Hangman. "Of course it's all got the royal arms and so on upon it?"

"Every spoon, knife, fork, dish, salver, and pepper-box," responded the footman. "By jingo! Dan'el, won't there be work for old Jeremy's melting-pot!"

"I hope so," rejoined the Hangman. "And won't there be a precious rumpus, too, when it's missed from the iron safe! Suppose the knife-grinding fellow that made the key, should hear of it—don't you think he'll come for'ard and give evidence in the matter?"

"I shouldn't have trusted him to make the key if I hadn't found out beforehand that he was all right," answered John. "Ah! didn't I pump him nicely? He let out that he was wanted in London for something queer that he'd done—and he's off into the country as far away as he can go. I'm sure it's quite safe with him, in fact."

"Well, you're not a fool, John—and you wasn't born yesterday," observed the Hangman: then, after a pause, he said, "And now, when is it to be done?"

"Name your own time," responded the footman. "But recollect that this job is betwixt you and me alone, and that nobody else is to have a finger in the pie. It will make our fortunes, Dan'el."

"Yes—it won't be a bad haul for our nets," observed the Hangman, in a tone of satisfaction. "The worst of it is that we shall be so completely at old Jeremy's mercy. But this is a thing we must

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see too: and, by all the fiends! I'll slit the ancient villain's windpipe if he don't treat us well in the matter."

"If you speak so loud you'll awake that bumpkin in the corner there," said John, pointing with his pipe towards the countryman.

"Ah! I forgot him," observed the Hangman. "But those fellows sleep like tops. Well, now we've to settle the night for this little business of our'n—and then I shall be off."

"You're going back to London to-night, Dan'el?" said the footman, interrogatively.

"To be sure I am—or else how the devil could I be at business to-morrow morning at seven o'clock?" demanded the Hangman.

"Ah! that barbering dodge of your's is a capital blind!" observed John, with a subdued chuckle. "But you've got such a precious agreeable and pleasant look, that I wonder half your customers ain't afraid to trust their faces to your razor. There's such a short distance between the chin and the throat——"

"Come, none of your chaffing," growled the Hangman, sulkily. "We didn't make ourselves: if we did, may be I should have put a handsomer head on my body."

"And then you wouldn't have done for the office of Jack Ketch," rejoined the livery-servant, whom the landlord's strong ale had enlivened into a bantering mood. "But what with the joint avocations of Public Executioner and Cheap Barber, my friend Dan'el Coffin is the most important personage in Fleet Lane, Farringdon Street, London."

"I say, old fellow," exclaimed the Hangman, his countenance becoming terribly dark and his eyes glaring with luminous fires,—"do you want me to flatten this pewter pot on your skull? Because if you do, you're going just the right way to provoke me to it. What the devil has come upon you all of a sudden?"

"Why, can't you stand a joke, Dan'el," said the livery-servant. "I'm sure I didn't mean to offend you——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Hangman, suffering himself to be appeased. "But I'm not of the liveliest temper in the world, you know," he added, with a ghastly attempt at a smile; "and I can't understand a jest. Now, then—once more, what night is it to be?"

"Suppose we say next Sunday night," observed John, after a few minutes' consideration. "The old lady never has any company of a Sunday evening, and always goes to bed early."

"Let it be Sunday evening, then," said Jack Ketch: "and in the meantime I'll see old Jeremy and whisper to him what's in the wind."

"Do so," rejoined the footman. "At midnight punctually you'll——"

The remainder of the sentence was breathed in the lowest tone to the Hangman's ear.

"Good! The appointment shall be kept to a moment," replied the latter worthy: then, having emptied his pewter pot, he rose to take his departure.

John the the footman likewise tossed off the remainder of his ale; and the two friends separated, leaving the country bumpkin still snoring in the corner of the tap-room.

CHAPTER XV.

OUTRAGE AND MYSTERY.

It was on this same Tuesday evening of which we have just been writing, that an incident occurred in the neighbourhood of Canterbury, which we must pause to chronicle in its proper place.

The sun had set—the delicious softness and calmness of twilight was upon the scene — the flowers were closing up their buds, as if wearied of expending their fragrance on a thankless air—and the twitter of the birds became fainter in the trees.

The charming Louisa was seated in that bower where we last beheld her in company with the handsome and adoring Jocelyn Loftus. She was alone—and pensive: but her pensiveness was not imbued with affliction—scarcely with sorrow. It was rather the stagnant thought of love: for she had been pondering the whole day, and was pondering now, upon the image of the young man to whom she had given her heart.

On the preceding evening he had told her that he must leave Canterbury for a few days—perhaps not more than three: but at all events, he had positively assured her that his absence would not extend beyond a week at the very outside. His contemplated marriage with the charming maiden, by involving a change of position, rendered it necessary for him to repair to London to look into his affairs: and Louisa had given him a letter which he undertook to deliver in person to Clara in Stratton Street. He was naturally anxious to avail himself of this opportunity of paying his respects to the sister of his beloved one; and the reader may rest assured that Louisa had not only written a very long letter, but had also charged him with a thousand fond messages for Clara.

Jocelyn, who had been residing for many weeks at an hotel in Canterbury, took his departure by the first coach on the Tuesday morning, so that he might reach London at an early hour in the evening, and thus have time to write letters to those persons whom he intended to call upon next day. For he was really and naturally most anxious to dispose of his business with all possible promptitude, in order to return the sooner to Canterbury and to the sweet society of her whom he loved with such unfeigned devotion.

Louisa was therefore now alone,—alone, at the delicious twilight hour, in the umbrageous arbour. She thought of everything that Jocelyn had said to her on the preceding evening,—how he had implored her to be happy during his temporary absence—how he had affectionately kissed away her tears, whispering the tenderest vows and protestations the while. She thought also that she was bound to rejoice at this visit which he was paying to London, inasmuch as it would furnish the opportunity of rendering him acquainted with her sister, and also of ascertaining that she was both well and happy. And then, too, this journey to the metropolis was undertaken for the purpose of settling his affairs previously to the arrangements for that bridal ceremony which was to make him indissolubly her own: and therefore, as she reviewed all these circumstances, Louisa could not well experience affliction at her lover's absence.

The sun had set some time—the twilight had merged into the deepening obscurity of the hour—and still Louisa remained in the arbour. The profound tranquillity which prevailed was congenial to her feelings;—and in a sort of dreamy reverie she sate pondering upon the topic so dear to gentle maidens who truly and fondly love.

She had left her aunt sleeping in her chamber, with the servant-girl Mary watching by her side; and the young lady knew that if her afflicted relative awoke, she would receive the kindest care from that faithful domestic. Louisa was not therefore in haste to quit the scene of deep shade and profound silence where she could ponder, with such abstraction of sentiment, upon her cherished love.

It was near ten o'clock; and Louisa was at last thinking of returning into the cottage, when she was startled by a noise like that of some one forcing a way through the hedge surrounding the garden. She listened with suspended breath—and all was still. Then, as the influence of that sudden alarm subsided, she rose from the bench in the arbour and was hastening towards the cottage, when two ruffians sprang forth from the dense shade of the fruit-trees. A hand that was instantaneously placed upon her mouth stifled the faint shriek which had risen to her lips: and at the same moment a rough voice menaced her with terrible things if she dared to create an alarm.

But these threats were needless: for the poor girl was now in a fainting condition—and she would have fallen to the ground had not the arms of the two ruffians supported her. In this state was she borne to a gap which had been made in the hedge near the arbour: and, being carried through the opening, she was conveyed to a vehicle resembling a gipsy's van, and which was waiting at a little distance. Into this she was thrust, though not violently; and the door was closed upon her, leaving her in utter darkness.

"Cheer up, young lass—you've nothing to be terrified at," said a female voice, which, by its tones, was evidently that of an old woman.

"Who are you?—what does this mean?" inquired Louisa, partially recovering herself, but scarcely able to believe that what was passing could be otherwise than a dream.

"I musn't answer no questions," was the reply, given in the same harsh voice as before, and in a course, vulgar tone. "But you ain't a-going to be killed—so don't be afeard on that score.

Louisa pressed her hands to her brow to steady her whirling thoughts. She was seated upon a bench in the vehicle, entombed in the profoundest darkness, and with some old hag as her companion. The vehicle itself was now moving on at a rapid rate. But whither was it going?—what destiny was in reserve for her? Surely she must be the victim of some terrible mistake? Who could possibly have any interest or motive in perpetrating this outrage upon her?

"You must have captured the wrong person?" she said at length, but in a tone of the most poignant anguish. "Tell me—speak—whom were you instructed to take prisoner?"

"My sons did it, young lass," was the response, the harsh tones of the old woman's voice grating through the darkness of the vehicle. "They know all about it—and if your name's Louisa Stanley, there's no mistake in the business whatsomever."

An exclamation of despair burst from the young lady's lips—and the sense of her complete helplessness struck upon her with an effect that was almost maddening. Good heavens! what was to become of her aunt?—what would the poor maid-servant think? The idea was distraction! And then, if she were to be kept a prisoner for any length of time—if Jocelyn were to return and find her absent—or if he wrote and his letters remained unanswered——O God! these reflections, as they swept through Louisa's brain, were fraught with the excruciations of ten thousand agonies!

The vehicle had proceeded about twenty minutes, when the wheels began to rattle over the pavement of a street: and Louisa was thus made aware that it was entering Canterbury—no doubt at some point to reach which it had taken a circuitous route, inasmuch as the distance between the cottage and the nearest suburb might have been accomplished in a quarter of the interval. In a few more minutes it stopped; and the old woman said in a stern voice, "Now, young lass, you must let me put a hood over your head ——"

And while thus speaking, she stretched out her arms towards Louisa. But the instant the young maiden experienced the contact of fingers that felt cold, sharp, and skinny as the claws of some horrible animal, her already overwrought feelings and excited imagination conjured up the most appalling ideas;—and believing that she was cooped up in the van with a fearful—perhaps unearthly—object, she sought to find vent for her frenzied terrors in a wild, thrilling scream. But it died upon her lips—her emotions suddenly overpowered her—and she fell back in the vehicle, deprived of all consciousness.

When Louisa Stanley awoke again, she found herself lying upon a bed, with a serious-looking elderly female standing by her side

"Where am I?" demanded the agitated girl, a host of painful reminiscences crowding in upon her mind: and before a syllable of response could be given by her to whom the question was addressed, Louisa's eyes swept with the speed of lightning round the room, as if she sought, in the nervous excitement of her terror, to embrace every object at a glance.

A candle, placed upon a toilette-table, lighted the chamber, which was small but well furnished; and the walls appeared to be covered with a thick baize instead of either wainscotting or paper. The bed on which Louisa found herself reclining, was hung with heavy draperies, now drawn aside no doubt for the purpose of affording her as much air as possible: and equally massive curtains at the end of the apartment facing the couch, showed where the window was situated.

"Where am I?" she had demanded, half starting from the bed as this rapid survey was followed by the conviction that it was no dream from which she had just awakened, but that she had really been snatched away from her home and borne to a strange place.

"Tranquillise yourself, young lady," said the female, in a voice the mildness of which contrasted strongly with the harsh tones of the hag whose touch had so frightened the maiden in the gipsy van.

"But where am I?—and by whose command am I brought hither?" exclaimed Louisa, springing from the couch.

"I cannot answer your questions, Miss," returned

the woman. "All I can say is, that you have nothing to apprehend either on your own account or that of any person dwelling at your cottage."

"What am I to understand by the latter portion of your remarks?" demanded Louisa, with feverish—almost delirious impatience.

"I mean that some reasonable excuse has been made for your absence from home," was the reply. "A trusty person has delivered such a message to the servant at the cottage."

"Then, great heaven! is my absence to be long?—is my captivity to last for days—or weeks—or——"

And horrified at the prospect which her terrors were shadowing forth, the unhappy girl stopped short and burst into tears.

"I must again observe, Miss," said the woman, "that I dare not answer any queries which you may put to me. But I implore you to tranquillise your feelings——"

"Oh! what will become of me?—for what doom am I reserved?" exclaimed Louisa, in a voice broken by sobs that half suffocated her: and as she thus gave vent to her bitter, bitter affliction, she wrung her hands in despair.

The female said nothing—but stood back a few paces and gazed with cold and impassive look upon that spectacle of woe which would have touched any heart that was not inured to such scenes. Perhaps she thought that torrents of tears would afford relief to the agonized maiden: and so she let her weep on. And if this were her calculation, she was not deceived in it: for those pearly floods and those suffocating sobs proved a vent for the surcharged violence, though not for the torturing keenness, of Louisa's mental agony;—and becoming more composed outwardly, she again addressed all kinds of queries to the matron.

"I am here to obey your orders, Miss, in everything that becomes an attendant," was the response; "but not to be garrulous or communicative. If you need refreshments, I will procure them immediately: every luxury is at your disposal. If you desire to seek the bed which is there ready for you, I will assist you in your night-toilette. And as it is growing late, I think you would do well to adopt my suggestion. At all events, you may command me as you choose—and if you wish to be alone, I will leave you."

"Yes—leave me—I would be alone!" answered Louisa, vague thoughts and undefined hopes of escape naturally springing up in her mind.

An imperceptible smile for a moment moved the lips of the female, as if she penetrated the unhappy girl's design and knew how vain it was: but merely wishing her a cold "Good night," she quitted the room.

It appeared by the sound as if *two* doors closed behind the woman: but whether this were fancy or not on Louisa's part, it assuredly was no delusion when the noise of a key turning in the lock and a bolt being drawn on the outside, fell upon her ear.

"O heaven! what will become of me?" cried the poor girl, before whom those ominous sounds seemed to conjure up the blank darkness of despair: but the next instant she fell upon her knees—and from the depths of her stricken soul arose a voiceless yet fervid cry to Him who sits above the stars and sees and hears everything that takes place upon earth.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MARQUIS OF LEVESON.

The day following the incidents just recorded was Wednesday; and the scene again shifts from Canterbury to London.

The Marquis of Leveson rose at an earlier hour than usual. His favourite and faithful valet, Stephen Brockman, saw that his lordship was labouring under a certain amount of nervous excitement: but the dependant, as discreet as he was devoted, ventured not the slightest allusion to the circumstance. He knew full well that if the Marquis intended to make him a confidant in anything which had transpired or was anticipated, his lordship would not require to be drawn out, but would speak of his own accord: whereas, on the other hand, if the nobleman purposed to keep his own counsel, he would assuredly do so.

The toilette of the Marquis of Leveson was completed. The whiskers were artistically dyed—the false teeth, which had lain all night in rose-water, were fitted in—the wig looked as well as a natural head of hair—and there was not a crease in the elegantly fashioned garments. A diamond pin shone on the snowy shirt-frill—a gold chain of exquisite workmanship festooned over the morning waistcoat—and a couple of rings, the value of either of which would have made any mechanic or artizan happy for the rest of his life, glittered on the nobleman's right hand.

"Now, Brockman," began the Marquis of Leveson, as he took a last survey of himself in the full-length mirror, or psyche,—"I have some particular instructions to give you."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet, perceiving that the ice was about to be broken.

"In the first place I intend to remain at home the whole day," continued the Marquis; "and I shall sit in the Crimson Drawing-Room. Whoever calls, no matter what the appearance of the visitor may be, let him or her be immediately shown up."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet.

"You know the two porcelain vases, standing on either side of the fire-place? Well—let a loaded pistol be placed in each, with the butt uppermost, so that they may be ready to the hand if need be."

"Two loaded pistols, my lord!" echoed the valet, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"Yes—two loaded pistols, Brockman," repeated the Marquis, in a tone of authority: "and take care that they *are* loaded. But you need labour under no apprehension on my account: I am not going to fight a duel. The precaution is merely taken because the visitor whom I expect may prove an insolent one."

"Your lordship's commands shall be obeyed," answered the valet.

"And you may put a nosegay in each vase, Brockman," continued the Marquis, "so as to hide the pistols. But these are not all the instructions which I have to give you. I have chosen the Crimson Drawing-Room because it has two bells—one ringing in the servants' hall, and the other in the passage leading to your own apartment."

"Yes, my lord," said the valet.

"Well," resumed the nobleman, "you must now pay particular attention to the instructions I am

about to give. The moment a visitor arrives, you will hasten to your own apartment and pull down the window-blind. But you will on no account quit the room until I send word that you can do so. On the contrary, you will remain there to listen attentively for the bell in the passage: and the moment you hear it ring *once*, you will draw up the blind. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, my lord," was the reply.

"But if you should hear the bell ring *twice*, Brockman," continued the Marquis, "you will, at the second peal, hasten down to the Crimson Drawing-Room, where I shall in that case need your presence."

"Very good, my lord," answered the valet. "Has your lordship any farther instructions?" he inquired, wondering whether he was to receive an explanation of the extraordinary proceedings and precautions just detailed by his noble master.

"Nothing more, Brockman," was the response. "I am now going straight to the Crimson Drawing-Room, where you can order breakfast to be served up."

The valet bowed and withdrew, considerably disappointed at being thus left in the dark relative to the affair now in progress. The moment the door closed behind him the Marquis opened a drawer and took out several Bank-notes to the value of two thousand guineas. Having carefully copied the numbers of the notes upon a slip of paper, which he locked up in the drawer, he placed the notes themselves in his waistcoat pocket, and then descended the stairs to the Crimson Drawing-Room.

This apartment, which borrowed its distinctive epithet from the hue of the draperies and the cushions of the chairs and sofas, was furnished with the most luxurious splendour. It was very lofty—and the ceiling was painted to represent the sky at the hour of sunrise, in order that the rosy tints which the artist was thus enabled to introduce should match the crimson paper on the walls and the colour of the furniture's rich trappings. The mirrors in this superb apartment were four in number and of enormous size. Magnificent porcelain vases were filled with flowers that rendered the atmosphere fragrant; and the light, softened and subdued by the hangings at the windows, was of that auroral tint which the sun-beams borrow when passing through bowers of full-blown, blushing roses.

There were two doors to the Crimson Drawing-Room—one opening from the landing, and therefore serving as the usual means of ingress and egress; and the other, at the opposite side of the apartment, leading into a suite of chambers to which the dependants of the household generally had no access. The key of the door thus communicating with that secret range of rooms, was always in the possession of the Marquis; and when those rooms required cleaning and dusting, the housekeeper and Stephen Brockman were exclusively entrusted with that duty. It was of this suite that a rumour existed to the effect notified at the commencement of our narrative: namely, that they contained pictures and statues of such a character as to excite maddening desires even in the breast of the sternest anchorite or the coldest virgin.

But to resume our tale. The Marquis of Leveson seated himself in the Crimson Drawing-Room, and partook of the chocolate that was served up. While thus lingering over his breakfast, he reviewed all the precautions he had been adopting. Contrary to his habit upon first rising in the morning, he had dresssed himself for the day, because he did not know how soon his expected visitor might come, or how late he might be kept waiting for the arrival. He had ordered pistols to be placed ready at hand in case of need: and he had devised the means of summoning his valet, if his presence should be wanted. He had numbered the Bank-notes; and the drawing up of the blind in Brockman's apartment was also a portion of the ramified preparations he had made.

Pleased with his review of these arrangements, the Marquis finished his breakfast, and rang the servants' bell for the footman to remove the silver tray. The domestic who answered the summons brought in some letters which had just arrived by the twopenny post; and the nobleman proceeded to examine them with the leisurely ease of one who is pretty well assured that his circumstances in life are a guarantee against the arrival of any disagreeable correspondence.

The first letter which he opened, ran as follows:—

"*Tuesday evening, September* 17*th*, 1814.

"Start not, my dear uncle, when you see my handwriting and learn that I am once more in London. I returned on Sunday evening, but am preserving the strictest *incognita*, for reasons which you can too well divine. I propose calling upon you to-morrow (Wednesday) at about twelve o'clock. Pray be at home—and, what is more, contrive to be disengaged and alone, as I wish to speak to you on matters of the greatest importance.

"Your affectionate niece.

"ERNESTINA DYSART."

"Poor Ernestina!" said the Marquis to himself, as he laid down the letter. "She is the only one of the whole family that I ever loved. But then, while yet a mere girl—and before that unfortunate marriage into which she was inveigled—she nursed me during my long and serious illness——Poor Earnestina! Yes—I will see her—to be sure I will see her!"

And the Marquis rose to ring the servants' bell, in order to give orders that his niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart, should be admitted when she called at mid-day: but suddenly recollecting that he had already issued instructions to the effect that every one, no matter who it was, should be shown up into his presence, he returned to his seat.

Resuming the examination of his letters, he opened the second one on the pile which the footman had placed before him; and he read its contents as follows:—

"*Tuesday evening, September* 17*th*.

"My lord,

"Much as I deplore the necessity of holding personal communication with your lordship, circumstances nevertheless compel me to request an interview in the course of to-morrow. I shall therefore wait upon your lordship at about one o'clock.

"I have the honour to remain, my lord

"Your lordship's obedient servant and nephew,

"ALGERNON CAVENDISH."

"The insolent boy!" ejaculated the Marquis, tossing the letter indignantly upon the table. "He disowns his relative—and then requests an interview! And doubtless, if the world knew all, he would be termed high spirited—and so forth!

But I will see him—yes—I will see him: for I am curious to know what he can possibly want with me. By the bye, how strange is this coincidence—the brother and the sister both coming to me on the same day—both writing at the same time—and yet not in concert! No—for I dare say that Algernon and Ernestina have not met for some time past."

Thus musing, the Marquis of Leveson took up a third letter; and instantly recognising the handwriting of the address, he opened it and read the following lines:—

"13, *Stratton Street, Piccadilly,*
"*September 17th*, 1814.

"Dear Lord Leveson,

"I have a particular favour to request of you, which I am certain you will grant. But I do not like to commit it to paper; and therefore I will do myself the pleasure of calling at Leveson House to-morrow (Wednesday, the 18th) at about three o'clock. Do be at home, there's a dear good soul.

"Your sincere friend,
"ELIZABETH BATHURST."

"Upon my honour! methinks I have done well to remain at home the whole day," murmured his lordship to himself. "What a troop of visitors! And I suppose that my friend Miss Bathurst wants to borrow some more money of me. Borrow, indeed! As if she would ever repay me! Why, it is but six weeks or so, since I lent her a thousand pounds. It is very clear that she is not coming for the purpose of returning it—otherwise she would not intimate that she has a request to proffer. Ah! it is very fortunate for such ladies as Miss Bathurst that there are such men as the Marquis of Leveson in the world."

The current of the nobleman's musings was turned into another channel, when, on taking up the fourth letter, he recognised the handwriting of Mrs. Owen. The epistle contained the following words:—

"*Richmond, Tuesday evening, Sept. 17th.*

"My dear Leveson,

"To-morrow morning I shall be in London with the girls. All is settled—and they are to take their departure at once. I have received a letter from our gracious Queen to that effect. They have all four been well tutored by me: and I am certain that not even the members of the famous Secret Police of Paris, nor yet the most astute brethren of the Order of Jesuits, could be better prepared to play their part than are my daughters. I shall take them to-morrow as far as Woolwich and see them embark: and then I shall return at once, passing through London on my way homeward. I therefore propose to call upon you between four and five to-morrow afternoon, as I wish to have a few words with you in private.

"Faithfully your's,
"ANNE OWEN."

"This is most extraordinary!" exclaimed the Marquis aloud. "Four appointments made for to-day, in addition to the one which had induced me to remain at home! It is scarcely credible—and if such a string of coincidences occurred in a romance or novel, the reader would cry out against such an improbability. Well, at all events my day will be thoroughly occupied! But if *the* visitor,—the visitor of visitors, as I may call him or her, whichever it is to be, who will call with the pocket-book and to receive the two thousand guineas,—if *this* visitor, I say, arrives while either of the others happens to be with me, I must at once get rid of the latter, be it niece or nephew—Miss Bathurst or Mrs. Owen."

Having arrived at this determination, the Marquis of Leveson proceeded to examine the remaining letters: but their contents were not of a character to interest the reader.

Having run through his correspondence, the nobleman rose from his seat and advanced to one of the windows. On the opposite side of the street a beggar-man was posted. A wretched object, in truth, did he seem, with his garments in rags, a white handkerchief bound round his head as if he had sustained some injury, and a black patch over one eye.

But the Marquis, as he caught sight of that miserable-looking creature, only smiled significantly and turned away from the window.

CHAPTER XVII.

ERNESTINA AND ALGERNON.

PUNCTUALLY as the time-piece upon the mantel proclaimed the hour of noon, a hackney-coach stopped at Leveson House; and a lady, handsomely dressed, but closely veiled, alighted. On entering the hall of the mansion she threw back her veil, and revealed a countenance that was strikingly beautiful. Her age appeared to be about four-and-twenty; and a certain air of melancholy which gave a plaintive expression to her features, enhanced the tender interest that her style of loveliness was calculated to inspire.

The hall-porter instantaneously recognised this lady, and greeted her with the profoundest respect. A footman who was in attendance informed her, in answer to the inquiry which she made, that the Marquis was at home; and he at once conducted her to the Crimson Drawing-Room.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart!" exclaimed the domestic, thus announcing the visitress as he flung open the door of the apartment.

"My dear niece, I am rejoiced to see you," said Lord Leveson, advancing to welcome her: then, kissing her affectionately upon the forehead, he conducted her to a seat, placing himself near her.

We have before observed that there seems in the human character to exist a necessity for loving something or somebody. The most selfish of scandal-mongering old women will love their cat: the most griping of misers may cherish an affection for a faithful dog;—and the most brutal ruffian oftentimes is gentle and docile with his mistress. So it was with the Marquis of Leveson. Unprincipled and heartless as a voluptuary—selfish and egotistical to a degree with regard to his pleasures—and ready to sacrifice anybody or anything to the gratification of his sensualities,—this detestable nobleman entertained a truly paternal affection for his niece Ernestina.

Truly had he himself observed, in the musings which her letter had excited in his mind, that she was the only being he had ever loved. His wife he had never cared for: and without a tear had he followed her to the grave. He had no children—and he hated his nephew, Lord Algernon Cavendish, who was his heir: all other relatives that he had, did he likewise hate or else feel indifferent about—with the exception of Algernon's sister, his niece Ernestina. He had loved her from her childhood: and his affection was increased by the tender care

with which she had nursed him during a long illness.

But still his love was of a peculiar character. She had married against his consent: indeed, she had eloped with the man who became her husband; —and the Marquis swore a deadly oath that he would never recognise the match—never speak to Mr. Dysart—never do anything for him. Nor could all his love for Ernestina induce him to alter his mind: so that for the last few years (since that fatal elopement and marriage) the lady had been to a considerable degree estranged from her uncle's society.

But now the niece and her noble relative have met again—and the latter has welcomed Ernestina kindly. He has kissed her brow—he has conducted her to a seat—he has placed himself near her—and he gazes upon her with mingled attention and interest. She has been married five years: during that period he has not beheld her often—and it is upwards of six months since he saw her last. She is still beautiful—touchingly, charmingly, fascinatingly beautiful: and he deplores in the profundities of his soul that such beauty should have been thrown away upon such a man as Paul Dysart.

It is not however because Ernestina's husband is a dissipated, reckless, good-for-nothing character,—nor because he is a gamester and a spendthrift,—nor because he is much older than the lady herself,—it is not for all these reasons that the Marquis of Leveson abhors the alliance which his niece has formed. But it is because Mr. Dysart is a man of broken fortunes—unconnected with any aristocratic family—in fact, a downright adventurer. The Marquis therefore considers that Ernestina has disgraced herself, beyond all reparation, by such a match; and though he now receives her

kindly, she knows full well that were she even to mention the name of her husband, her uncle would start up in a fury and overwhelm her with the bitterest reproaches.

"I am rejoiced to see you," repeated the Marquis of Leveson.

"I am rejoiced to see you also, my dear uncle," answered Ernestina, with a profound sigh. "You are in good health—you look well——and—and you are happy!"

"I wish that you were happy also, Ernestina," said the nobleman. "But if there be anything that I can do to lighten your afflictions—and so long as it is for *yourself* alone, mind——"

"Thank you, my dear uncle—thank you!" exclaimed Lady Ernestina Dysart, with a singular and enthusiastic fervour. "I told you in my brief note that I wished to speak to you upon a matter of importance—and it is only to beseech a favour at your hands."

"Name it, niece—name it," said the Marquis, hurriedly. "But not a word upon a particular topic—not a syllable on behalf of a certain person——"

"No: it is only for myself that I am about to solicit this favour, my dear uncle," interrupted the lady, with a species of hysterical nervousness in her manner, and a painful excitement in her tone: then, with the evident trepidation and suspense of one who fears a refusal, she said, "The boon that I crave at your hands, is money!"

"I thought so!" ejaculated the Marquis, his lips quivering. "But if it be to bestow upon one who will waste it at the gaming-table—and leave you to want or embarrassment——"

"No, no—it shall not be disposed of thus!" exclaimed Ernestina, with impassioned violence. "But I can assure you, my dear uncle, it will relieve me—yes, *me*—from cruel difficulties——"

"Well, well—you shall have it, Ernestina," interrupted the Marquis, pressing her hand as a father might do towards a daughter. "How long do you remain in London?"

"Eh?" she ejaculated, as if startled by the question. "Oh! not another hour, provided you assist me in this respect. I am going away—and—and it will perhaps be a long time before you will see me again."

"A long time before I may see you again," said the Marquis, echoing her words in a musing tone, as he revolved in his mind the amount of money he should bestow upon her: then, taking a hint from her observation, he added, "Well, if you are going away from London—and if I shall not see you for a long time—I must ensure you against want and misery. Remain here for a few minutes."

And the Marquis hurried from the room.

Repairing straight to his own chamber, he took out a bundle of Bank-notes from the drawer which has already been mentioned; and selecting enough to make up two thousand guineas, he hastened back to the Crimson Drawing-Room.

Why he pitched upon this precise sum, it is not easy to say. He assuredly had no particular motive in doing so: but perhaps it was because this amount was uppermost in his mind whenever he thought of money-matters at all—inasmuch as it was the sum he had engaged to pay for the restoration of his pocket-book. Or else, as he had once before presented Ernestina with that amount, since her marriage, he was led to manifest an equal liberality on this occasion.

However,—be the influence which ruled him at the moment what it may,—such was the sum that he placed in her hands on his return to the Crimson Drawing-Room.

"Here are two thousand guineas, Ernestina," he said: "and may they prove really and truly serviceable——"

But she cut short his words by throwing herself into his arms—and laying her head on his shoulder, she sobbed aloud.

"Come, my dear girl—come—cheer up," he exclaimed, considerably moved, if not deeply affected. "I can understand your sorrows, although I do not choose to allude to them. Cheer up, I say——"

"Pardon this ebullition of grief, dear uncle," said Ernestina, in a trembling tone: then, raising her head, she wiped away her tears and by a strong effort regained her composure. "Have you heard anything of Algernon lately?" she inquired.

"Yes—read this note," replied the Marquis, as he placed in her hands the letter which he had received from his nephew by the morning's post.

"Ah! Algernon is in London—and he will call upon you to-day?" cried Ernestina. "I have not seen him now for more than a year," she added, in a tone of profound melancholy: "and when last we met——"

"You had words—and you parted in anger," said the Marquis of Leveson. "I have not forgotten that you told me this circumstance. Indeed, it was soon afterwards that Algernon adopted the singular—strange—mad—insulting resolution, which has so embittered me against him!"

"Alas! poor brother!" murmured Lady Ernestina Dysart, her fair bosom swelling with a painful sob. "I dare not remain to meet him," she added, in a musing tone, and forgetting that her words met her uncle's ear.

"Why should you not dare to meet him?" demanded Lord Leveson, hastily. "Was your quarrel of so serious a nature?—for you will be pleased to remember that I am unacquainted with the particulars."

"Let us not dwell upon the subject, my dear uncle," said Ernestina, in a tone of entreaty. "Indeed, I must take my leave of you—I must say farewell!"—and she rose from her seat.

"Farewell, niece—farewell, my dear Ernestina," exclaimed the nobleman, pressing his lips once more to her forehead. "You know that I wish you all possible happiness—and if, now and then, you choose to write me a line——"

"I will, I will, dear uncle," cried the lady, in a tone which expressed the joy she felt at the kind hint thus breathed in her ears. "Once more farewell!"

And having embraced her uncle affectionately, Ernestina Dysart hurried from the room.

Scarcely had the Marquis of Leveson recovered from the excitement produced by this interview with his niece, when the door of the Crimson Drawing-Room was again thrown open—and Lord Algernon Cavendish was announced.

The Marquis gave a cold and scarcely perceptible inclination of the head, in acknowledgment of the equally cold but somewhat more decided salu-

tation on the part of the young nobleman who was alike his nephew and his heir.

Algernon was younger than his sister, but equally handsome, though of a different style of beauty; and his appearance was altogether more intellectual —more expressive of fine feelings—and more indicative of a lofty character, than that of Lady Ernestina Dysart.

"My lord," he said, as he entered the room, "I repeat orally the regret which I recorded in writing, at being compelled thus to seek your lordship's presence——"

"Is there contamination in it, proud boy?" demanded the Marquis, his sneering tone and scornful look contrasting strangely with the mild voice and affectionate demeanour that he had adopted towards the young man's sister so short a time previously.

"My lord," answered Algernon, with a dignified firmness, "if anything bordering upon a quarrel takes place between us, it will be of your lordship's seeking. Although I can never regard your lordship with love or esteem, I do not wish to treat you with disrespect."

"Is not the whole tenour of your conduct an outrage, Lord Algernon Cavendish?" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson angrily. "I have given you your proper name: why should you be ashamed of it?"

"Oh! ashamed of it—heaven knows that I am ashamed of it!" cried the young lord, with impassioned sincerity. "But I beseech you not to force me into a discussion which will only re-open so many wounds. With your permission, therefore, I will proceed to state the object of my visit to your lordship."

"Go on, Lord Algernon Cavendish," said the Marquis of Leveson, who seemed to take delight in throwing the young man's name at him as if it were a taunt: and the old nobleman remained standing, in order that he might not be compelled to ask his nephew to be seated.

"I require some money, my lord," answered the latter, in a tone of ingenuous candour and frank confidence; "and I thought perhaps that you would prefer letting me have it, rather than compel me to seek the assistance of money-lenders."

"Artlessly spoken, upon my honour!" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, with an ironical laugh, "And you, Lord Algernon Cavendish, who are so particular—so very strait-laced—so extremely punctilious,—*you* talk of flying to money-brokers and usurers!"

"And wherefore not, my lord?" asked the young nobleman, with the unruffled voice and calm demeanour of one who is conscious of no wrong and who is practising no duplicity. "The affair is very plain and simple. Circumstances have arisen which render it necessary that I should have two or three thousand guineas at the present moment; and——"

"And you come to me as a matter of right?" said the Marquis, with a sneer. "But suppose that I refer you to the Jew discounters——"

"No, my lord—I shall address myself to some respectable solicitor or conveyancer?" interrupted Algernon, still maintaining a calm dignity of demeanour.

"And they will doubtless suppose that I am ruined or in pecuniary embarrassments, and unable to assist you!" exclaimed the Marquis, angrily. "But they shall not have an opportunity of spreading false reports concerning me," added the nobleman, who was as vain of his reputation for wealth as he was proud of his haughty title: "and although my nephew Lord Algernon Cavendish does declare that I dissipate all my revenues in luxury and debauchery, I will show him that I can spare two or three thousand guineas for *his* wants, whatever they may be. Yes—and more generous, too, than he, I shall not even ask the purpose for which he needs the amount. Now then, Lord Algernon Cavendish—be pleased to name the exact sum which you require."

"Two thousand guineas will be sufficient, my lord," answered the young nobleman, studiously avoiding any inflammatory comment upon his uncle's bitter and sarcastic speech.

"Two thousand guineas—eh?" murmured the Marquis to himself: "everything is two thousand guineas to-day! Indeed this is the day of days for strange coincidences. But wait a few moments," he said aloud, "while I fetch my cheque-book."

And the old nobleman quitted the apartment.

In about five minutes he returned: and as he opened the door, he was struck by surprise on beholding Lord Algernon examining one of the pistols which had been deposited in the vases and concealed by the nosegays.

"What means this prying disposition, insolent boy?" exclaimed the Marquis, in an angry tone.

"Your lordship will pardon me, I am sure," said the young nobleman, with unchanging demeanour: "but, being passionately fond of flowers, I took up that nosegay,"—pointing to the *bouquet*, which he had laid upon the table,—"and inside the vase I beheld the pistol. Conceiving that it could be nothing more than an admirably contrived porcelain ornament, I was curious enough to take it out of the vase in order to examine it: and my astonishment at finding it to be a real weapon had not subsided when your lordship returned to the room. If I have done wrong, I am sorry: but I have given this long explanation because I would not for a moment seem to be of an impertinently prying or rudely curious disposition."

The Marquis of Leveson looked very hard at his nephew while the latter was thus speaking: but the young man flinched not beneath the survey—and the old nobleman appeared satisfied that the proceeding was in reality as innocent and meaningless as it was represented.

Lord Algernon, without another word, put back the pistol into the porcelain vase and replaced the nosegay: while the Marquis of Leveson sate down and wrote a cheque upon his bankers for two thousand guineas.

"There, Lord Algernon Cavendish," he said, as he handed his nephew the draft with a frigid politeness. "This will save you the necessity of applying to usurers—or respectable solicitors," he added ironically.

"I thank your lordship," returned Algernon. "May I inquire if you have seen or heard from my sister recently?"

"Lady Ernestina has been with me this day," answered the old nobleman.

"This day!" echoed Algernon. "Then she is in London? But her husband ——"

"Mention not his name, sir,—allude to him

not!" cried the Marquis, fiercely. "Have you, anything more to say to me?"

"Only to inquire Ernestina's address—for, being in town, I will see her—and—and we will embrace as brother and sister ought," said the young nobleman, his voice becoming tremulous with painful but touching reminiscences.

"In good sooth," ejaculated the Marquis, "I did not think of demanding where she was staying. But her visit to London is a mere flying one—made in strict *incognito*—and moreover she did not remain three-quarters of an hour with me altogether. Beyond this, I have no information to give you on your sister's account."

"I will not ask if she is happy," said the young nobleman, with a profound sigh; "because I know that she cannot be! My lord, I will not detain you longer—I beg to say farewell."

"Farewell, Lord Algernon Cavendish," returned the Marquis of Leveson, flinging a taunt as it were after his nephew even at the moment of departure.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MISS BATHURST AND MRS. OWEN.—THE POCKET-BOOK.

At three o'clock punctually, an elegant carriage drove up to the door of Leveson House in Albemarle Street; and a lady, dressed with richness and even splendour, alighted.

She was about five-and-forty years of age, and retained the traces of great beauty. Her dark hair was still unstreaked with silver—her eyes were large and piercing—and her teeth were admirably preserved. Upon her cheeks art had shed the bloom which once was natural there; and although somewhat thin, her figure was well proportioned.

On introducing her to the Crimson Drawing-Room, the footman announced Miss Bathurst.

"My dear friend," said the Marquis of Leveson, hastening forward to welcome her, "you are indeed punctual to your appointment!"—then, as he handed her to a seat, he observed, "And, upon my honour! looking as young and as handsome as ever!"

"Flatterer!" exclaimed Miss Bathurst, with a smile, showing that the compliment was far from disagreeable. "But your lordship is famous for the utterance of those amiable nothings——"

"Oh! fie," ejaculated the Marquis. "Is it a mere meaningless phrase to assure Miss Bathurst that she never looked better in her life. But, after all, a lady of two or three-and-thirty is in the bloom of her existence——"

"And your lordship at five-and-forty is a perfect prodigy of youthfulness," rejoined the lady. "You and I, my dear Marquis, *may* talk of our age, for old acquaintance' sake."

"Yes — to be sure we may," observed the nobleman, glancing at himself complaisantly in the mirror over the mantel.

Now he knew full well that Miss Bathurst was at least five-and-forty—while the lady, on the other hand, was equally aware that his lordship could not be a day under sixty: but they chose thus to compliment and flatter each other, being mutually silly and vain enough to fancy that the one believed the other to be sincere.

"Why, how long have we been acquainted, my dear Marquis?" said the lady, after a pause. "Surely it must be twenty years?"

"Yes—I should think it must," was the response.

"But then we were so young at the time?" said Miss Bathurst.

"To be sure!—a mere boy and girl," observed the Marquis, with a sigh, "Do you remember the first time you ever saw the Prince?"

"Oh! don't talk to me of the Prince—I hate him!" exclaimed Miss Bathurst, petulantly. "You, my dear Marquis, who are acquainted with everything that has taken place between us, can judge whether I have been well used, or not?"

"Why should you complain, my dear friend?" said the nobleman, in a soothing tone. "You have not been worse treated than others. Look at Mrs. Fitzherbert—Lady Jersey—the Duchess of Devonshire—and a host of other beauties—some dead, and some still living——"

"Well, we have all had the supreme honour of being the mistresses of his Royal Highness," exclaimed Miss Bathurst, bitterly; "and he cares not one fig for the memory of those who are gone or the welfare of those who are living."

"You should not say that, my dear friend," observed the Marquis. "His Royal Highness always speaks of you with the utmost consideration: but then, as the world does not generally know how tender your intimacy has been, the Prince has never paid you such particular attention in public as to afford scope for scandal."

"You know very well that everything has been broken off for some time between the Prince and me," said Miss Bathurst. "But never mind! I am not going to inflict a long tirade concerning my grievances, real or imaginary. I come to ask you a favour."

"Of what kind?" demanded the Marquis, who had already anticipated the object of her visit.

"Instead of saying, '*Of what kind*,' my dear friend," replied Miss Bathurst, reproachfully, "you should say, '*The favour is already granted.*'"

"Well, the favour is already granted," exclaimed Lord Leveson, laughing: then to himself he said, "She has fairly caught me, and I must accede to her demands."

"I was convinced that I could rely upon your friendship," continued Miss Bathurst. "In plain terms, I want you to lend me a couple of thousand guineas for a few weeks; and I shall be enabled to settle with you for everything altogether."

"A couple of thousand guineas!" ejaculated the nobleman, with a start.

"My lord, if this request be disagreeable to you," said Miss Bathurst, with an air of offended pride, "I am sorry that I should have exposed myself to the mortification of a refusal."

"Not at all!—you have misunderstood me!" exclaimed the nobleman, unwilling either to annoy or irritate so old a friend. "I can assure you that my ejaculation meant nothing personal: but you said two thousand guineas—and there is a strange coincidence——But no matter!" he cried, suddenly checking himself. "You shall have the money, with pleasure."

"I knew, my dear Marquis, that I could rely upon your kindness," observed Miss Bathurst.

"You are aware that I possess a tolerable income: but I have latterly had many and heavy drains upon me——However, it is not worth while to enter into particulars."

"I hope that Horace Sackville is not extravagant," said the Marquis.

"Not exactly extravagant," replied Miss Bathurst: "but my nephew is necessarily expensive, moving as he does in the best society. He is, however, an excellent young man——"

"And a great favourite with us all," added the Marquis of Leveson. "But I will write you a cheque for the two thousand guineas——"

"Have you no Bank-notes in the house?" inquired Miss Bathurst. "I am anxious to return straight home to Stratton Street; and I shall have to make sundry disbursements the instant I get back."

"I can give you a portion in notes and gold, I dare say," observed the Marquis. "Excuse me for a few minutes;"—and he left the room to pay another visit to his private drawer up-stairs.

On his return he beheld Miss Bathurst examining with minute attention all the elegant and costly ornaments so profusely scattered about the Crimson Drawing-Room.

"This is really a superb apartment, my dear Marquis," she exclaimed. "Often as I have visited your mansion, I hsve never been in this particular room before. What splended draperies!—what a beautiful ceiling! The picture of sun-rise is so thoroughly natural! And what exquisite vases!" she added, her eyes as they swept about the room in all directions, settling for a few moments upon the very porcelain jars in which the pistols were hidden beneath the nosegays of flowers. "I never admired the general effect—the striking *tout ensemble*—of a drawing-room, so much in all my life!"

"I am charmed that it pleases you," said the Marquis: then, in a significant tone and with an equally meaning look, he observed, "But you *have* been in this room before—when it was furnished in a totally different style—all white silk and satin——"

"Ah! I recollect," exclaimed Miss Bathurst, the blood mantling with so deep a dye upon her cheeks as to show through the artificial bloom of the rouge. "Then that door——"

"Opens into the apartments to which the Prince beguiled you in your girlhood," responded the Marquis of Leveson, his tone and look alike indicating all the gloating enjoyment which one voluptuary experiences at the thought of another's triumphs.

"Many years have elapsed since then," murmured the lady to herself, as she heaved a profound sigh: then, starting as it were from the train of thoughts into which she had fallen, she said, "But I am idling here and wasting your time also, my dear Marquis. Where is the money?"

"I can give you five hundred guineas in notes and gold, and the remainder in a draft on my banker," returned the nobleman.

"That will answer my purpose very well," said Miss Bathurst: then, having received the money, she bade Lord Leveson farewell and took her departure.

It was now half-past four o'clock—and the Marquis began to wonder whether the pocket-book would be brought to him and its ransom-money claimed this day. He advanced towards the window: and still, motionless as a statue and in a piteous attitude of grovelling mendicancy, stood the beggar on the opposite side of Albemarle Street. The fellow's countenance was upturned, as if towards heaven: but the Marquis knew full well that his eyes were fixed upon the window of Stephen Brockman's chamber, which was over the Crimson Drawing-Room.

Scarcely had Lord Leveson turned away from the casement again, when a post-chaise and pair drove up to the mansion; and Mrs. Owen was shortly afterwards announced.

But the instant she entered the apartment, the nobleman saw that her countenance wore an expression of extreme trouble and agitation: mingled grief and rage were visibly depicted upon her features.

"What in heaven's name, my dear Anne, has occurred?" he demanded, hastening forward to meet her.

"Oh! my dear Leveson," she answered, in a voice indicative of turbulent emotions,—"such a misfortune!—such a calamity!"

And she threw herself, with evident exhaustion, upon a sofa.

"Explain yourself!" cried the Marquis. "What has happened?"

"That ungrateful, deceitful little minx, Mary," said Mrs. Owen, gasping for breath and fanning herself with her handkerchief.

"Your youngest daughter? Well, proceed," exclaimed the Marquis, impatiently.

"She has fled—absconded—run away!" answered Mrs. Owen:—and then she burst forth into the bitterest lamentations.

The Marquis besought her to explain the particulars of the occurrence: and after some trouble, owing to the violence of the lady's mingled anger and grief, he succeeded in eliciting the following details.

Pursuant to the arrangements specified in Mrs. Owen's letter to the Marquis, she had taken her four daughters to Woolwich, where they were to embark for the continent, in order to enter upon the particular career for which they had been trained, and the astounding nature of which will transpire in due course. Agatha, Emma, and Julia were all three in ecstacy at the prospects which opened before them: but Mary, the youngest, evidently sustained a forced gaiety throughout the journey from Richmond to Woolwich. On arriving at the last mentioned place, Mrs. Owen ordered the post-chaise to drive to an hotel, where she and her daughters alighted to take refreshments previous to the embarkation of the young ladies. Soon afterwards Mary quitted the room on some excuse: and as she did not return, her mother and sisters grew uneasy. An hour elapsed: and still she appeared not. Alarm was enhanced into terror mingled with bewilderment: but at last all uncertainty was cleared up by the arrival of the following letter, which was put into Mrs. Owen's hands by the chamber-maid of the hotel:—

"Mother and Sisters, I must bid you farewell! I have striven—Oh! God knows how I have striven—to tutor my mind to this career for which I have been trained: but it is useless! I cannot bring myself to contemplate it otherwise than with loathing and abhorrence. I would sooner perish the most miserable of deaths, than calmly and deliberately enter upon a course of such fearful duplicity—such transcendent wickedness—such immitigable cruelty! No, no—God preserve me from such crimes! It goes to my heart to tear myself from my dear sisters——But, O mother! mother! will you not sooner or later repent ——

"I can write no more. God bless and forgive you—yes, and change your hearts! I will not betray you—but I cannot become the accomplice in such black iniquity!

"The unhappy and almost distracted,

"MARY."

This letter, which was blotted with the traces of many tears, had been left upon the table in a chamber to which the young lady had retired; and the maid having found it, delivered it to Mrs. Owen, to whom it was addressed. But Mary—the unhappy Mary—had disappeared, to the mingled grief and anger of her mother and sisters. The vessel was however ready to sail: Agatha, Emma, and Julia accordingly took leave of Mrs. Owen and embarked—and the mother, having thus lost as it were all her daughters, repaired to London in order to keep the appointment which her letter had fixed with the Marquis of Leveson.

Such were the particulars which the nobleman gleaned from Mrs. Owen, who likewise handed to him for his perusal the above note which the fugitive Mary had left upon the table at the hotel in Woolwich.

"It is awkward—very awkward," observed the Marquis. "But she promises not to betray the one grand secret—and from the tenour of her letter it is clear that her mind is profoundly influenced by the affection which she entertains for yourself and her sisters. This influence will not only keep her lips sealed while absent, but will speedily bring her home to you again."

"If I thought so, I should be far less uneasy than I am," said Mrs. Owen. "But she is young—inexperienced—beautiful—and if some designing villain falls in with her, he may entice her to reveal all those secrets ——"

"Let us not anticipate misfortunes nor meet calamities half-way," cried the Marquis. "Console yourself, my dear Anne—console yourself: and tell me what you wished to communicate—for your letter hinted that you had something to say to me."

"Oh! this cruel affliction has well nigh driven all other subjects from my mind," exclaimed Mrs. Owen. "But the matter to which my note alluded is a pecuniary one. You are aware of the enormous expense to which the outfit of my daughter has put me. Their dresses—their jewels ——"

"I understand all that very well," interrupted the Marquis. "But I thought that the Queen had pledged herself to pay every expense?"

"Her Majesty guaranteed me all my outlay to the extent of two thousand five hundred guineas," answered Mrs. Owen. "Five hundred her Majesty has paid me: but her letter of yesterday tells me that I must wait a short time for the remaining two thousand guineas, as she is somewhat embarrassed at the moment in respect to funds available for secret purposes. Now, my dear Leveson, you know her Majesty's meanness as well as I do—and you must agree with me that she will endeavour to postpone the payment of these two thousand guineas as long as she can. The want of the money troubles me much. The jeweller's bill is eight hundred guineas—each of the girls being obliged to have a complete set of diamonds, in addition to other costly articles. Then there is the milliner's bill, four hundred and fifty guineas ——"

"My dear friend," interrupted the Marquis of Leveson, "I do not require you to enumerate all these details. I can perfectly understand that the bills are owing—and, what is more, that they must be paid. If you will give me a receipt for the amount, so that I may obtain it of Her Majesty the Queen, who will not be able to put me off with excuses so easily as she can you, I will at once write you a cheque for the two thousand guineas."

"This is precisely the favour which I was about to solicit," said Mrs. Owen. "But do you know, my dear Leveson, I am so exhausted—so overcome—that I must beg you to ring for a glass of wine ——"

"Or a drop of that precious cordial, Anne, which the Prince gave me some years ago, and which you have occasionally tasted?" suggested the Marquis. "I have a bottle left—but it is in my own chamber—and Brockman shall fetch it."

Thus speaking, the Marquis was about to ring the bell, when he recollected that his faithful valet must be up in his own room, according to the instruction given him in the morning. The nobleman therefore said something about Brockman's being engaged, and volunteered to hasten and procure the cordial himself. Mrs. Owen thanked him for the trouble which he thus took in her behalf; and his lordship hurried from the apartment.

When he returned at the expiration of a few minutes, he found Mrs. Owen lying in apparently a very exhausted condition upon the sofa: but the racy liqueur which he had brought with him, soon effected a marvellous change in her condition. Her physical energies and her spirits both revived; and it seemed as if she had been partaking of the elixir of life.

"The resuscitating power of this cordial is truly marvellous," observed Leveson, with a smile. "You feel better now?"

"I feel as if a new existence were infused into my veins," answered Mrs. Owen. "My dear friend, I am deeply indebted to you for this kindness. The fatigues of travelling—the annoyance produced by the Queen's postponement of the promised money—and then the terrible affliction relative to Mary,—all these influences had completely prostrated me. But now I am myself again—and I must return home to Richmond without delay."

She accordingly penned the receipt for the two thousand guineas; and the Marquis sate down to write a cheque for that amount. But an ejaculation fell from his lips, as the coincidence struck him that it was *again*, and for the *fourth* time, a sum of two thousand guineas which he was about to pay away: and yet *the* demand for that amount had not as yet been made upon him. Mrs. Owen looked at him in surprise as he gave utterance to that exclamation: but he made some excuse and proceeded to fill up the cheque. The business was thus terminated—and Mrs. Owen took her leave.

It was now nearly six o'clock in the evening: and the Marquis of Leveson began to be seriously alarmed lest the expected visitor with the pocket-book should not come at all. He was annoyed, inasmuch as that pocket-book contained several *billets-doux*, the contents of which, if made public, would seriously compromise the reputation of two or three ladies of high rank: it likewise contained some private *memoranda* relative to the affair for which Mrs. Owen's daughters had been destined—and also a few letters from the Prince Regent, of

a somewhat serious nature. In a word, it was highly important to the Marquis that he should regain possession of his pocket-book. And, after all, there was yet plenty of time for this restoration to take place: it was only six o'clock in the evening—and an emissary from the masked desperado might come by eight—or even by ten o'clock: nay, if that were all, there was hope even up to midnight—for the unknown chief had said, "*Remain at home all day long on Wednesday and take care to have the two thousand guineas ready at hand—indeed, about your person—and leave the rest to me.*"

"Well, then," thought the Marquis to himself, "Wednesday is not over until midnight—and I shall not despair in the interval."

Having strengthened his hopes by means of this reflection, he rang the bell and ordered dinner to be served up. In about half-an-hour a luxurious little repast was spread upon the table in the Crimson Drawing-Room; and the nobleman lingered over it in order to while away the time. Eight o'clock struck ere he had the last course removed and the dessert placed before him. Then he amused himself with the fruit and the wine pleasantly enough for a couple of hours.

It was now ten o'clock. Meanwhile the curtains had been closed and the lamps lighted in the Crimson Drawing-Room.

The Marquis rose from his seat and paced the apartment with increasing nervousness. Was it not intended to keep the appointment?—had the seal on the envelope of the pocket-book been violated, and the contents scrutinized?—and was the restoration of the pocket-book to be delayed for purposes of increased extortion? These and a hundred other perplexing queries did the Marquis put to himself as he paced to and fro in the apartment.

The time-piece upon the mantel struck eleven. He went to the window and drew aside the curtains. By the light of the street lamp he saw the beggar-man still at his post.

"At all events *he* does not despair," said the Marquis to himself, as he quitted the casement: "nor shall I just yet! There is another hour."

But this hour passed away—and still no one came. Midnight now struck—and Wednesday was gone!

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Marquis aloud. "I have been gulled—duped—deceived—made a fool of! The rascal never meant to keep faith with me! Eternal maledictions be upon him! And all my fine precautions are set at naught. In good truth, Lord Leveson feels uncommonly small at this moment!"

As he uttered these words in a voice of bitter vexation, he filled a bumper of wine and tossed it off.

"It is useless to wait any longer," he muttered to himself: and he was about to quit the room, when he recollected the pistols in the vases. "I must not leave them there—and Brockman may forget to remove them. If any of the other servants should find them, they would think it strange: and moreover, as they are loaded, an accident might occur."

Thus musing, the Marquis of Leveson approached the nearest vase: and as it was the one in which his nephew Algernon had discovered the pistol, it reminded him of that incident.

"He must have been astonished at finding a loaded weapon in such a place," thought the Marquis,—"especially concealed under so beauteous a nosegay! What could he have imagined? But little reck I for his suspicions or his conjectures."

Having taken out the pistol from the first vase, the nobleman now approached the other one. He removed the nosegay—he thrust in his hand—and an ejaculation of wonderment burst from his lips as he drew forth a packet, which he instantaneouly recognised to be the one containing the much-thought-of pocket-book!

Yes—there it was, precisely as he had last seen it, in the chamber hung with black cloth, on the Monday night!—there it was, with the seal of the envelope unbroken! To tear off that envelope and assure himself that the pocket-book was really inside, was now the work of a moment: and no disappointment was experienced!

Wonder of wonders!—how could this have happened?

Instinctively the Marquis of Leveson thrust his fingers into his waistcoat pocket, and drew forth the Bank-notes, the numbers of which he had so carefully taken. The pocket-book, then, had been restored without the ransom-money! But whose hand had consigned it to that vase?

The Marquis re-examined the porcelain jar. He drew forth the pistol: but there was nothing else in this vase—no note, not a written line or even a scrap of paper to throw a gleam on the darkness of this mystery!

He rang the bell, and ordered Stephen Brockman to be sent to him.

"When you deposited the pistol in that vase this morning," he inquired the moment the valet made his appearance, "did you observe anything else there?"

"I am sure, my lord, that there was nothing in either of the vases," was the response; "because I dusted them before I put in the pistols and the nosegays."

"Most extraordinary!" ejaculated the nobleman, scarcely able to believe that the whole was otherwise than a dream.

He advanced to the window and looked out. The beggar-man was gone.

"He was only to remain until midnight," muttered the Marquis to himself: then turning towards Brockman, he said, "The duty which I enjoined you to perform in your chamber, has been uncalled for. The truth is, I was robbed of my pocket-book on Monday night; and the robber undertook to return it this day for a certain sum of money. I have had an officer in disguise waiting in the street; and the pulling up of the blind in your room was to have been the signal for him to follow any one who should immediately afterwards leave the house. But the pocket-book has been restored by other means. You may now retire: I shall not go to bed for half-an-hour, or so."

Brockman withdrew, much mystified by the rapid, laconic, and somewhat incoherent explanations which his master had volunteered;—and the nobleman sate himself down to reflect upon an incident the nature of which however seemed to defy all conjecture.

And this was the current of his musings:—

"That pocket-book was not in the vase when the pistol was placed there. Brockman clearly

establishes this fact. But can I believe him? Yes: it is impossible that he should be in league with the desperadoes: for if he were, he would not restore the pocket-book without obtaining the two thousand guineas. All suspicion against him, were I inclined to entertain any, must therefore be dismissed at once. And new in what a perplexity am I involved? Throughout the day have I been in this room—quitting it only on four occasions—and then leaving some one here. I have received, too, four visitors. The first was my niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart. I left the room to procure her the money she required. Of course she could not have put the pocket-book in the vase: such an idea were utterly preposterous! Next came my nephew, Lord Algernon Cavendish. I left the room to fetch my cheque-book. But, with all my ill-feeling towards Algernon, I cannot for a moment blind myself to the fact that he is a noble-minded young man and incapable of leaguing himself with robbers and villains. Next came Miss Bathurst. I left the room a third time—and on this occasion it was to procure some available cash. But Miss Bathurst cannot possibly have anything in common with the plunderers of pocket-books. Lastly came Mrs. Owen. A fourth time did I quit the apartment: it was to procure the cordial. I would, however, much sooner believe that the whole affair is a delusion and a dream, than that Mrs. Owen has anything to do with a gang of scoundrels. The pocket-book, then, was not deposited in that vase by either Ernestina—Algernon—Miss Bathurst—or Mrs. Owen. And no other visitors have been near me! But what renders the whole proceeding so strange—so singular—so very remarkable, is that *each* of my four visitors received from me the precise sum which was stipulated by the masked robber as the ransom-money for the pocket-book: and yet the pocket-book is restored without any ransom being demanded at all! What can I think?—upon what conjecture can my mind possibly settle? All is bewilderment,—perplexity—confusion—darkness! And yet I have been awake the whole day: not for an instant could I have been caught napping. No one could possibly have entered this room without being perceived by me. Nor was it worth while for the depredator to have restored the pocket-book thus stealthily, since he received no ransom-money. If he made up his mind to return it *without* the ransom-money, he could as well have sent it by a messenger or delivered it himself at the street-door. He might have wrapped it up in brown paper, and sent it as a coach-parcel. But no such thing! It is deposited in a vase in the room where I remain the whole day and receive my visitors. What am I to think?—where are my suspicions to settle?"

And having expended an hour in such vain and unsatisfactory meditations as these, the Marquis of Leveson retired to his own apartment: but when slumber fell upon his eyes, the mystery of the pocket book haunted him in his dreams.

CHAPTER XIX.

WEDNESDAY: OR, THE THIRD SUITOR.

THUS passed this memorable Wednesday with the Marquis of Leveson: but we must not forget that it was also the day which had fallen to the lot of Colonel Malpas, in order to be used by him for any designs which he might conceive relative to the beauteous Miss Trelawney.

It was, then, in the evening of this same memorable Wednesday, that if we peep into the elegantly-furnished boudoir at Acacia Cottage, we shall find Venetia engaged with the business of the toilette.

Jessica, her lady's-maid, is exerting all her skill in setting off the charms of her mistress to their greatest advantage: as if they were not already matchless—beyond the adventitious auxiliaries of ornament or dress!

How superb is that auburn hair, with its rich velvet-like gloss!—what queenly crown or what diadem of an empress can compare therewith? And how dazzlingly white are those softly-rounded and sloping shoulders!—how voluptuously grand the half-exposed amplitude of the luxuriant bust! She does not make the slightest movement without revealing some new charm—without developing some new grace. Her whole form breathes love and tenderness,—for her eyes have that gently languishing look which makes their expression softly amorous, if not absolutely wicked and wanton,—and her lips, of dewy redness, appear to exhale elysian sweets.

Jessica, who loves her well and is unfeignedly proud of her mistress's glowing beauties and resplendent charms, is delighted with her appearance. But Jessica is not alone with Venetia Trelawney in the boudoir upon the present occasion. A young lady is likewise there; and while she assists in the toilette, she fails not to echo all the compliments that fall from Jessica's lips.

This young lady was Miss Arbuthnot, the daughter of Venetia's "companion." She was about four or five-and-twenty years of age, tolerably well-looking, and nearly as tall as Venetia. She had been staying with some relations in the country, and had now come up to town to pass a short time at Acacia Cottage.

When the toilette was pretty nearly completed, Mrs. Arbuthnot herself entered the boudoir and added her praises to those which her daughter and Jessica were bestowing upon Venetia's appearance—so that the object of all these compliments (for flatteries they were not) was compelled to beseech her friends and her maid to be more sparing in the outpourings of their enthusiastic admiration.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was a lady of about fifty years of age. She was what is called "a poor gentlewoman, very well connected,"—the death of her husband having left her without any visible means of income. Her daughter, whose name was Penelope, found a home with some relatives in the country; while Mrs. Arbuthnot herself became "companion" to an old lady. Upon this old lady's demise, circumstances enabled Mrs. Arbuthnot to obtain an introduction to Miss Trelawney, who was at the moment taking up her abode at Acacia Cottage: and thus was it that Venetia obtained her duenna-like companion.

In appearance, Mrs. Arbuthnot was a good-humoured, well-mannered, and obliging woman. She was very bustling and active—always the first up in the house in the morning, and the first to observe that "it was bed-time" at night. She never

allowed the servants to be idle: but still she managed them without much scolding—and, what is more remarkable still, without making them her enemies. She drank a glass of wine with evident satisfaction—and did not object to a *leetle* drop of warm brandy-and-water in the evening. Like all persons in her dependant condition, she was inclined to be over-complimentary, and to forget that she had a right to entertain an opinion of her own: and this constant habit of sacrificing, veiling, or forcing her feelings, naturally rendered her an adept in all the little arts of duplicity, deceit, and hypocrisy. Whether she was utterly and completely false,—or whether this ductile and pliant disposition on her part was only a very venial weakness, without any sinister intention,—could not possibly be ascertained on a short acquaintance. But though Venetia's knowledge of her was limited to the experience of a few weeks, the young lady appeared to place full and implicit confidence in her duenna-like companion.

Living as Miss Trelawney was,—her own mistress, young and handsome, reputed to be well off, and unmarried,—she could not have dispensed with some person in Mrs. Arbuthnot's capacity. Having no relatives residing with her, the companionship of an elderly, respectable, matron-like female was absolutely necessary, on the score of propriety and protection. Thus was it that Mrs. Arbuthnot accompanied Venetia in the carriage and to the theatre—sate down to table with her—occupied the next bed-chamber at Acacia Cottage—and superintended all the domestic arrangements of the household. For these duties and services, she received a salary at the rate of sixty guineas a-year, in addition to board, lodging, and all kinds of perquisites.

But to return to the thread of our narrative. Venetia's toilette was completed: and she looked radiantly handsome—overpoweringly lovely. Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot were also dressed in evening costume: and, the carriage being announced at

about eight o'clock, they entered it and were driven to the residence of Lady Wenlock in the neighbourhood of Kew.

Her ladyship gave on this occasion an entertainment which she was pleased to denominate an autumnal fête. The mansion stood in the midst of spacious pleasure-grounds, consisting of gardens, shrubberies, shady avenues, and delicious arbours. Fountains and fish-ponds varied the picturesque scene; and conservatories of fruits and flowers were scattered about in all directions. The entire enclosure was now one vast illumination, produced by myriads of variegated lamps; so that in the deepest recesses of the bowers and in the vistas of the largest avenues, it was as light as day.

The effect was brilliant and dazzling. The pools, in which the gold and silver fish disported, were penetrated with the living lustre: the conservatories, all of glass, shone as if in a perfect blaze;—and the fountains scattered their myriads of drops as if the shining waters flung gems around in their ceaseless play.

Lady Wenlock was a wealthy widow, about sixty years of age. and remarkable for the hospitality of her disposition and the brilliancy of her entertainments. Though well stricken in years, she loved to see young persons happy; and her greatest delight was in gathering around her a host of youthful guests who would lay aside all extreme formalities and indulge in the exuberance of innocent mirth. Though perfectly lady-like in her bearing and polished in her manners, there was no frigid reserve nor affectation about her: she was thoroughly open-hearted, frank, and good-natured —and everybody felt "at home" when partaking of her hospitality.

With this excellent lady Mrs. Arbuthnot was well acquainted; and she had therefore easily procured a card of invitation for Miss Trelawney. The grounds were already thronged with guests when Venetia, her "companion," and Penelope arrived at the mansion; and from Lady Wenlock did Miss Trelawney experience a cordial welcome. Her appearance in the gardens was moreover productive of a great sensation—for her extraordinary beauty was such that no man could gaze upon without emotion, and no female eye could contemplate without admiration, tinged as this sentiment might also be with envy.

But scarcely had Venetia and the Arbuthnots thus made their appearance, when Colonel Malpas, who was one of the numerous guests already arrived, hastened up to Lady Wenlock and begged her ladyship to introduce him to Miss Trelawney.

"Oh! certainly," said the good-natured hostess: "and as Miss Trelawney and her friends are unaccompanied by any gentleman, I shall consign them, Colonel, to your especial care."

This arrangement was within the strictest rules of etiquette, and also of propriety—the more so as Malpas was a married man, although his wife was not present at the festival.

Accompanying the Colonel to the spot where Venetia, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Penelope were pausing to admire a beautiful fountain, Lady Wenlock introduced him to the three ladies—observing with the good-natured smile and cordial manner so well becoming a hostess who knows how to do the honours of her entertainments, "I have consigned you to the care of Colonel Malpas—and I shall be very angry with him indeed if he do not make himself agreeable."

"I can assure your ladyship," said the Colonel, with his most approved drawing-room drawl, "that if I fail in this respect, it will not be for want of inclination."

"I am certain of that, Colonel," replied Lady Wenlock: and off she sped to greet some new arrivals.

There was a slight deepening of the natural bloom on Venetia's cheeks as she bowed to Colonel Malpas when the introduction took place: and for a moment—a single moment—there was a haughty curl of her beauteous lip as she beheld an expression of mingled triumph and satisfaction sweep over the Colonel's countenance.

He offered her his arm, which she took: that is to say, she just laid her white-gloved fingers so lightly upon it that it was utterly impossible for him to feel the pressure of her hand at all. Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope walked together in front; and in this manner did the party enter one of the brilliantly-illuminated avenues.

"This is a pleasure, Miss Trelawney," said the Colonel, "which I did not expect—and—ahem!—which is the more delightful on account of being so completely unanticipated."

"I never beheld so enchanting a domain," observed Venetia, taking no notice of his clumsily-worded and awkwardly-delivered compliment. "It is a perfect paradise; and the beauty of all the arrangements is blended with the most exquisite taste."

"Beautiful beings are necessarily judges of beautiful things," said the Colonel.

"Yes—I have no doubt that Lady Wenlock was very handsome in her youth," returned Miss Trelawney, with an air of artless gaiety; "and therefore, if there be any truth in your remark, it is not astonishing that her ladyship should have had her grounds laid out so handsomely."

There was a slight and scarcely perceptible tinge of irony in the latter portion of this sentence; and Colonel Malpas threw a piercing glance upon Venetia to ascertain if the suspicion which struck him to that effect was well founded. But the beauteous features expressed only the animation of gaiety; and the self-conceit of the gallant officer likewise tended to reassure him.

"You did not exactly comprehend my meaning, Miss Trelawney," he observed. "But no matter. I wish to speak to you upon another subject."

"The weather, doubtless?" said Venetia, with subdued archness. "Gentlemen in fashionable life invariably talk of the weather——"

"'Pon my honour, that's excellent, Miss Trelawney!" exclaimed the Colonel, with a laugh as elongated as his drawling habit of speech. "You are really very severe upon us gentlemen. But no doubt we deserve it: for whenever we enter into conversation with a lady, we are sure to observe either what a fine day it is, or what a bad one. Ha! ha! you are quite a critic, Miss Trelawney."

"At all events you admit that I am a just one, Colonel Malpas," she observed, scarcely able to conceal her disgust at his flippancy and coxcombry.

"You are, Miss Trelawney. And in order that

I may not be included in the category of gentlemen who talk on commonplace subjects," he added, speaking with greater rapidity than usual, "I will proceed to touch on the topics to which I just now alluded."

He paused for a reply: but Venetia spoke not a word. He looked in her face: its expression was that of calm indifference, as if she did not for a moment imagine that he could have anything really serious to confer upon.

"You do not believe it possible, Miss Trelawney," he continued, "that in the midst of this brilliant scene I could venture to lead your attention to a solemn subject. But I must make that endeavour: for I have been fortunate enough—fortunate, I mean, in one sense,—to become acquainted with a secret that nearly concerns you."

"A secret that nearly concerns *me!*" echoed Venetia, a sudden flush appearing upon her countenance.

"Yes—a conspiracy that is afoot against you, Miss Trelawney," answered the Colonel, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper.

"I cannot possibly understand your meaning, sir," remarked Venetia, in a cold tone.

We should here observe that owing to the loitering pace at which the Colonel had purposely walked he had succeeded in allowing Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot to get upwards of twenty or thirty yards a-head in the avenue along which they were proceeding, and where there were no other guests at the moment besides themselves.

"It is for me, Miss Trelawney," said the Colonel, in answer to her observation, and assuming the confidential tone and manner of friendship or intimacy, —"it is for me to explain myself fully—and then you will comprehend me. For when I say that there is a conspiracy afoot against you ——"

"A conspiracy!" echoed Venetia, in a voice of mingled scorn and incredulity.

"Yes—a conspiracy," repeated the Colonel: "and if you will first make me a solemn promise——But surely there was some strange rustling amidst the bushes?" he suddenly cried, glancing to the right and left of the illuminated avenue of verdure.

"I heard nothing extraordinary," said Venetia. "And moreover," she continued in a dignified manner, "if there be any listeners or eaves-droppers there, it can make no difference to me, inasmuch as I am not seeking nor courting the confidence with which you appear so mysteriously anxious to honour me."

"Miss Trelawney," exclaimed the Colonel, with an ill-subdued petulance, "is it impossible for me to give you a proof of my friendship?—will you not at least condescend to hear what I may have to communicate, and then judge for yourself?"

"Proceed, sir," remarked the lady, with that cold laconicism which evinced a perfect indifference to anything Colonel Malpas could possibly have to say.

"You will give me your word, as a lady, that the communication I am going to make shall be regarded as confidential?" persisted the officer.

"The mere fact of giving such a pledge would be to invest this discourse with an importance which I do not feel disposed to ascribe to it," was Venetia's deliberate and measured answer.

An ejaculation of mingled petulance, annoyance, and wounded pride rose to the very tip of the Colonel's tongue, as he thus found himself beaten and baffled, step after step, in all his endeavours to place himself upon a friendly footing with Venetia and establish the intimacy of confidence between them. But he suppressed that ejaculation ere it obtained utterance;—and biting his lip almost till the blood came, he fixed his eyes upon her in order to read into the depths of her soul and ascertain whether she was playing some deep and unaccountable part towards him, or whether this was her natural character and disposition that she was displaying. But nothing appeared in the looks or the manner of the superb creature to warrant the belief that there was aught artificial and constrained in her demeanour, or studied and unreal in her conduct.

The Colonel was therefore alike perplexed and mortified. He knew not precisely which course to adopt—whether to proceed with his attempt to insinuate himself into her good graces by a great show of friendship, or to start upon some other tack. He was mortified, too, because he saw that his amicable advances were repulsed with a cold courtesy, and that while Venetia adhered to the rules of strict etiquette by regarding him as an acquaintance, she was decided in discouraging all endeavours on his part to place himself on a more intimate footing with her. His vanity was wounded—his pride was hurt;—and he already hated the beauteous creature in whose charms he nevertheless so eagerly longed to revel. But then he wished to possess her, not only because he was a sensualist and regarded her as the finest piece of flesh and blood that had ever yet tempted his voluptuous appetite: but also because there was a grand triumph to achieve over his five rivals who were embarked in the same enterprise and yearning for the same conquest—and likewise because there were six thousand guineas to be obtained by that victory!

"Perhaps, Miss Trelawney," he said at length, and in comment upon the last observation which had fallen from her lips,—"perhaps you will be induced to attach some little importance to my communication when you have heard it;—and I shall therefore trust to your generosity—I had almost said honour—to keep the matter a secret."

He paused for a reply: but Venetia remained silent. She was however displaying that polite attention which a well-bred lady shows to any one who is addressing himself to her: and, as the Colonel was thus satisfied that she did condescend to listen to him, he proceeded in his discourse.

"I have already hinted, Miss Trelawney, that a conspiracy is on foot against you; and I can afford you the amplest proofs that such is the case. Start not, however, when I inform you that your exceeding beauty has rendered you the object of a wager on the part of a few base and infamous voluptuaries: and inasmuch as the secret of this scandalous transaction has accidentally—or rather, providentially—reached my ears, I resolved to reveal the atrocious circumstance to you. Sorry am I to say that the personages engaged in this conspiracy are all associates and friends of my own, and with whom I cannot very well break off my intimacy: but if you will retain this matter a profound secret and condescend to follow such advice as I shall give you——There!" ejaculated the Colonel, once more interrupting himself with a sudden ejaculation of alarm, and stopping short in

the middle of the avenue at the same moment: "I could swear that I heard a rustling again in this thicket of evergreens on the right hand!"

"The same circumstance likewise struck me," said Venetia, with unruffled composure. "But if you have been recounting to my ears some secret the revelation of which may involve yourself in an unpleasant dilemma, I pray you to observe that I did not seek this confidence on your part."

"You speak, Miss Trelawney," replied the Colonel, in a trembling tone, "as if you really wanted your words to reach the ears of listeners, if such there be amongst those evergreens."

"I again declare, Colonel Malpas," said Venetia, with a calmness and an indifference that were most acutely galling to those feelings that had just rendered his voice tremulous with increasing petulance, mortification, and rage,—"I again declare that I attach no importance whatsoever to the romance with which you have been so kindly endeavouring to amuse me, doubtless for want of other topics of interest."

"Miss Trelawney," said the Colonel, in a voice that trembled more and more—while he slowly led her along the avenue, all thought of the rustling in the bushes having fled from his memory in the deepening excitement to which his feelings were thus subjected,—"Miss Trelawney, do you mean me to understand that you do not believe the truth of the communication I have ventured to breathe to your ears?"

"I will answer you frankly and candidly, sir," responded Venetia, looking straight forward as she walked by his side with her hand just resting upon his arm. "You tell me of a party of individuals who have made me the subject of some wager which you yourself denounce in the strongest terms: and yet you inform me in the same breath that these persons are all intimate friends of your own, and whose intimacy you do not choose to abandon on that account. I must either suppose, then, that you openly wink at their bad proceedings, while in private you speak so emphatically to me—or that you yourself are one of the individuals who have made me the subject of their wager, and that you are betraying your fellow-conspirators. Now, in either case, Colonel Malpas, your character as a man of honour would not be enhanced in my estimation: and therefore, as I cannot of course turn round upon you, and say that you are a false traitor in one way or the other, I must of course treat the whole rhodomontade as a pleasant romance which your fertile brain has conceived in order to while away the time."

"Miss Trelawney," said the Colonel, trembling with concentrated fury, "you make but a bad return for my confidence and my good intentions."

"But I did not seek your confidence, sir," replied Venetia, in that tone which conveyed remonstrance and rebuke in its very calmness: "and I can give you no credit for good intentions."

"Miss Trelawney," rejoined Colonel Malpas, in a voice that was low, but deeply accentuated, "you had better make me your friend than your enemy."

"If you dare to address me in this manner, sir," exclaimed Venetia, stopping short in the middle of the avenue—withdrawing her hand from his arm—and bending upon him a look that was full of dignity,—"I should do well to seek the protection of Lady Wenlock, who I am certain did not present you to me with the anticipation that I should experience this unmanly conduct at your hands."

"Miss Trelawney, you are too sensible to create *a scene*—I know you are—I am sure of it," said the Colonel, surveying her with a malignant sneer. "And therefore you may as well learn at once the truth from my lips,—which is that I love and adore you, and that I will compel you—aye, compel you—to look favourably upon me in return! Now, understand me, Miss Trelawney—I have set my whole soul—my very life—upon one enterprise: and that is, to achieve your conquest, haughty beauty that you are! By fair means or by foul, I will accomplish my aim——Ah! you may think to scorch me with the indignant looks of those flashing eyes—or to overwhelm me with that disdain which you have at this moment assumed! But I will act as an unscrupulous ruffian—I will play a fiend's part—I will even out-herod all the scoundrels that ever yet practised their scoundrelism against woman,—yes, all this will I do if you force me to extremes! For I will destroy your reputation—I will blast your fame—I will whisper to one and breathe in the ear of another that I have possessed you—that you are my mistress—that I am secretly blessed with your favours—aye, and I will even forge amatory epistles, signed by your name, to show confidentially to my friends as proofs of all the tales that I shall thus whisper concerning thee! This is the course which I will pursue, Miss Trelawney: and even though you may be the purest of virgins, yet will I bring you to be looked upon as the most profligate of Messalinas. Now, then—you know the nature of the warfare which I am resolved to wage. I give you one fortnight to deliberate: and, if by mid-day on the second Wednesday from this date, I do not receive a favourable letter from you, I will at once enter without pity and without remorse upon this tremendous crusade which I have shadowed out for your contemplation."

The Colonel ceased—and stood with folded arms in the presence of Venetia Trelawney. His countenance was deadly pale—his lips were ashy white and quivering: it was evident that he was both astonished and alarmed at his own immense audacity in the part to the full performance of which he had worked himself up. His whole appearance was that of a coward whom circumstances have for the moment imbued with the courage of desperation, but who can still scarcely believe that he has actually and positively done the deed the effect of which he pauses to contemplate.

But how had Venetia Trelawney received that matchless outpouring of scoundrelism—that atrocious complication of diabolical menaces? At first she had listened in cold contempt—then with fiery indignation—then with superb disdain—next in utter amazement—and lastly with haughty defiance: but never for a single moment with fear or dismay. Nothing could exceed the perfect grandeur of her beauty, as she stood gazing in silence, but collectedly and undauntedly, upon that man who had developed by degrees the sneaking paltriness of his disposition, and had attained a climax of villany by a rapid transition into the character of a cowardly ruffian.

"And now, sir," said Venetia, in a voice that trembled not and with looks that quailed not, although with heightened colour upon her cheeks,——"and now, sir, suppose that I went straight to Lady Wenlock and detailed to her, word for word, all that has emanated from your lips?"

"No, Miss Trelawney—no—you will not do it," returned Malpas, with another sardonic sneer. "A weak-minded, timorous, hysterical woman would adopt that course: but you are strong-minded, and will act with greater prudence. Because Lady Wenlock would not believe you: she could not possibly fancy that I am such a dastard—such a wretch—such a miscreant. You see that I know how to speak of my own conduct in befitting terms? Well, then—you yourself are aware that Lady Wenlock would treat your tale as an illusion—an impossibility. I should deny it indignantly—I should appeal to those who have known me for years——And then again," added the Colonel, with a smile of self-sufficiency and confidence, "the whole thing would sound so remarkably improbable——"

"Enough, sir—we will not protract this discourse unnecessarily," said Venetia, who had all along recognised the truth of the arguments thus insolently adduced, but who still did not choose to let it appear that she really saw their force. "I will tell you frankly and candidly that, woman though I am, I have courage and energy enough to treat your conduct—your bearing—even your menaces, in the only manner which is suitable to the occasion—namely, with contempt. You are right, therefore, in supposing that I shall forbear from what you choose to denominate *a scene*: and indeed, I should be especially loth to mar the pleasure which the excellent Lady Wenlock experiences in giving this entertainment. But you and I, sir, will part here—at once—and without another word. You can return in that direction," she added, pointing towards the mansion,—"while I hasten to rejoin my friends who are by this time at the end of the avenue."

"But do not mistake me, Miss Trelawney," said Colonel Malpas,—"nor treat my words lightly. Be mine—or I will perform all that I have threatened!"

And, darting upon her a look of mingled menace and misgiving,—for the reaction towards alarm at what he had done was even already taking place in his dastard mind,—he hurried along the avenue in the direction which she had indicated.

During the latter portion of the somewhat exciting scene which we have just described, Mrs. Arbuthnot and her daughter Penelope had walked on, without once looking behind them, to the end of the avenue;—and there they had seated themselves in a delicious arbour, where a table was spread with fruits, wine, cakes, and a varied assortment of light refreshments.

On separating from Colonel Malpas in the manner just recorded, Venetia was about to hasten along the avenue to rejoin her friends: but scarcely had the cowardly bully dashed away from her, when she was startled by a sudden rustling amongst the evergreens as if some one were forcing his way through them. She paused to look in the direction whence the sounds came;—and in another moment a tall stout man, with enormous black whiskers, emerged from the bushes and stood before her.

"Hush, ma'am—hush!—not a word, if you please," he immediately said, in a low, hurried, and mysterious tone. "I've overheard all that has passed—and if you want a witness at any time——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Venetia, as if suddenly struck by the importance of the proposal thus made her: "and to whom am I indebted——"

"Hush, ma'am, hush—not a word—for I am only an interloper here," said the whiskered stranger. "But if you want to see me—and perhaps it would be as well, for more reasons than one—you can send me a message or a note, and I shall not fail to attend your summons. Here's my card."

Thus speaking, the individual thrust a somewhat dingy morsel of pasteboard into Miss Trelawney's hand;—and without even waiting for a reply, he plunged amidst the bushes and disappeared from her view.

For a moment she stood undecided how to act: then glancing at the name and address which were printed upon the card, she placed it in her bosom and hurried along the avenue to rejoin her friends.

In the meantime dancing had commenced on the lawn in front of the mansion; and by the glare of the illumination the scene was brilliant and exciting. In another part of the grounds there was a splendid display of fireworks; and presently Venetia Trelawney, accompanied by Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope, retraced their way from the avenue and mingled with the crowd of guests who were gathered in the vicinage of the pyrotechnic exhibition.

"My dear Miss Trelawney," exclaimed Lady Wenlock, suddenly accosting her, "how is it that you are alone? Where is the Colonel? And will you not dance? There are numbers of gentlemen dying for the honour of being introduced to you——"

"I thank your ladyship," said Venetia, acknowledging the well-meant courtesy with a gracious smile,—"but I am somewhat indisposed this evening, and with your permission must retire shortly. As for Colonel Malpas, to whose care you so kindly entrusted us—we have by some accident separated from him——"

"Ah! in the rush to see the fireworks," exclaimed the good-natured hostess, little suspecting how serious a scene had taken place. "But you really cannot think of departing yet awhile? The recreations and amusements of the evening have only just commenced. Come, my dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, join your influence to mine—and Miss Penelope also—and let us induce Miss Trelawney to stay a little longer."

"It would be discourteous and ungrateful in the extreme to persist in leaving after your kind persuasion for me to remain," said Venetia: for she had not only conceived a sort of affection for the excellent-hearted Lady Wenlock, but she also saw that Penelope was anxious to stay.

"Now this acquiescence with my desire I look upon as a personal favour to myself," exclaimed Lady Wenlock: "for you will excuse an old woman like me telling you that you are the star of the assembly. But you will dance, will you not?—and you also, Miss Penelope?—Stay—I must seek you suitable partners."

And away bustled the well-meaning hostess, disappearing amidst the crowds of guests: but in a few minutes she returned, accompanied by two elegantly dressed and handsome young gentlemen—one of whom, the Honourable George Macnamara

she introduced to Miss Trelawney—and the other, Lieutenant Apsley of the Guards, she presented to Miss Arbuthnot. The gentlemen requested the ladies' hands for the ensuing dance—the favour was awarded—and the two couples took their places in the quadrille that was formed upon the grass-plat.

Venetia found her partner tolerably agreeable—at all events, unassuming and well-bred: and she entered with much spirit into the excitement of the dance. Her extraordinary beauty had already attracted universal admiration: but now the elegance and grace of her movements as she floated through the figures of the quadrille, rivetted all eyes upon her. When the quadrille was over, her hand was solicited for the next one by numerous aspirants for that honour;—and she continued to dance until past midnight, to the infinite joy of Lady Wenlock who more than once accosted her with whispered congratulations on having made herself so agreeable.

The saloons of the mansion were now thrown open for supper; and Venetia consented to remain a little longer. Lady Wenlock placed her on her right hand and bestowed the kindest attentions upon her: and at length, when Miss Trelawney rose to retire, the worthy hostess took an opportunity to whisper hurriedly in her ear, "My charming friend, I hope that you will henceforth look upon me as something more than a mere acquaintance." Venetia pressed the old lady's hand with grateful fervour: and hurrying away, she took the arm of the Honourable George Macnamara who was waiting to escort her to her carriage.

We should observe that from the moment Venetia parted from Colonel Malpas in the avenue, she beheld him no more throughout the rest of the evening. The Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were not present at the festival at all: and thus, after the scene with the Colonel, Venetia was not tormented by any of the suitors who were bent upon her conquest. The noblemen and gentlemen with whom she had danced, and whom Lady Wenlock had introduced to her at the supper-table, were therefore all new acquaintances;—and every one of them returned home completely ravished with the beauty and charmed with the conversation of the elegant and handsome Miss Trelawney.

But what thought Venetia herself of all this triumph which her loveliness had achieved, and of the homage and adulation which had been paid her,—what thought she, we say, of all this as she rode home with Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope? She was silent and dispirited: every now and then a sigh which she endeavoured to subdue, made her bosom heave;—and she thought more of that hurried sentence of whispered kindness on Lady Wenlock's part, than of all the fine compliments and adulatory language that had been breathed in her ears by the lips of elegant youths and titled aristocrats.

CHAPTER XX.

THE GREEN-BAIZE CHAMBER.

On this same Wednesday night of the festival at Lady Wenlock's mansion at Kew, another episodical incident belonging to our tale took place in respect to Louisa Stanley.

It was eleven o'clock on that same Wednesday night; and the hapless young maiden sate, the picture of woe, in the chamber to which she had been so mysteriously conveyed on the preceding evening.

Throughout the day she had seen no one but the serious-looking elderly female who attended upon her, and from whom she vainly sought an explanation of the outrage which had been thus perpetrated towards her. The woman had brought her in her repasts, which consisted of delicacies and were served up with silver plate: and on several other occasions during the day had she looked into the chamber to inquire whether Louisa wanted anything. But a negative was invariably given by the afflicted young lady, who also left the food untasted;—and if the elderly attendant essayed to console her, Louisa's only response was, "Tell me where I am—give me my liberty—or explain to me wherefore I am imprisoned here: otherwise you will see me perish with grief, or go mad with despair!"

To these adjurations, delivered with impassioned manner and wild voice, the female invariably answered to the effect that Miss Stanley had nothing to fear, but that she must not expect to receive those explanations which she sought until her mind was composed and the agitation of her feelings was subdued.

Perceiving, therefore, that she could glean nothing from this woman, Louisa did not encourage her presence in the room: the unhappy maiden preferred being alone, so that she might look her wretched position in the face—plunge into conjectures as to the author and the motive of her captivity—and rack her brain with plans for effecting her escape.

But let us pause to describe with precision the chamber in which she was immured. We have stated in an earlier chapter that it was small but well furnished, and that the walls were covered with a green baize. A closer examination showed that this baize was thickly wadded—or rather, that between it and the wall there was a compact stuffing of wool. This was ascertained by pressing with the hand on any part of the baize; and the object of such an arrangement could only be to prevent the escape of any sounds from within, and to beat back all sounds from without. Thus any horror—any atrocity—any cruelty might be perpetrated in this terrible chamber, without a chance of the victim's shrieks or cries being heard beyond those walls: while, on the other hand, no noise on the outside—no rattle of vehicles, if there were any—no striking of a clock, if any church were near,—no sound, in fine, whatsoever, could reach the ear of the captive and afford a clue to the whereabouts of the dwelling that contained this dreadful room.

Facing the couch were heavy draperies, reaching from a brass rod near the ceiling to the carpet

which their massive fringes swept. When these curtains were drawn aside, a window appeared, it was true,—but a window defended with massive iron bars, and looking only into another room, and not upon the open air. This other room had a conical skylight on the roof: but an inner range of glass was set in the circular aperture above which the skylight rose—and thus every precaution was taken to deaden, or rather hush and stifle any sounds either from within or from without.

When Louisa had awoke in the morning, after a few hours of restless and troubled sleep, the light had burnt out: but the woman, who had already entered the chamber, had drawn back the window-curtains—and the lustre of day, having first to penetrate through the double panes of the skylight in the next room, shone with only the dimness of a funereal gloom into the captive's chamber. Then, as to the doors, the idea which had struck Louisa on the previous evening was confirmed by the morning's close investigation: for she found that the inner door was covered with baize and stuffed like the walls—and whenever the elderly female made her appearance, an outer door was first unbolted and opened before this inner one moved upon its hinges. There were consequently two doors — thus completing and perfecting all those arrangements which had been so artfully contrived to render the chamber impervious to all sounds from without as well as to prevent the escape of even the shrillest shriek or the most piercing cry from within.

At least, such were the impressions which the construction of this terrible room made upon the mind of the unfortunate Louisa Stanley when she had by degrees ascertained all the particulars and details we have just recorded. And, Oh! there was something horribly foreboding—something hideously frightful in the mere sense of being held captive in such a chamber as this! It seemed as if the object and intent were to immure the victim in a living tomb—to separate her altogether from the world—to reserve her for some doom which would inevitably goad her to a desperation or an agony the shrieks and cries of which it was necessary to stifle and subdue!

But of what nature could this doom be? The mind of Louisa Stanley was too innocent and her imagination too pure to allow her to comprehend at the first glance the possibility of that extreme to which the abominable passions and burning lusts of man will sometimes hurry him. She was so utterly ignorant of the wild license of desire and the rabid frenzy of lascivious yearnings, that it was long ere a suspicion of the real cause of her captivity stole into her mind: and thus throughout the long, long day had she vainly tortured her imagination with conjectures relative to the object of her imprisonment and the author of the outrage.

That day had passed amidst alternations of wild grief and profound despondency—harrowing reflections and blank despair—torrents of tears and intervals of deliberate meditation. The evening had come—a lamp was placed upon the table by the elderly attendant—and the curtains of the window were once more drawn. The supper-tray was left in case she should choose to break her fast—for she had eaten nothing the whole day: but the woman had left her for the night—and Louisa only knew the hour because the attendant had told her that it was near eleven when she thus took leave of her until the morrow.

Pale—with dishevelled hair—and disordered apparel, sate the maiden in her prison-chamber. There was a wildness in her eyes which denoted an incipient frenzy of the brain;—and yet she pressed her hand to her throbbing brows in the hope of steadying her thoughts. She must escape—Oh! she must escape! But how?—where were the means?—in which direction lay an avenue of egress from that dreadful room?

Suddenly, and as if by inspiration, she remembered her adventure some weeks previously with the Reverend Bernard Audley, the Canon of Canterbury Cathedral. The recollection seemed to flash to her mind in the same way as a gleam of a lamp all in an instant discloses the aspect of some dark and unknown cavern. The strange proceeding of the Canon on that occasion appeared to connect itself with this terrible misfortune which had overtaken her. At first she essayed to discard the thought as involving an impossibility. It seemed so utterly improbable that a minister of the Gospel would act in such a manner towards a defenceless girl. But the suspicion grew upon her: some secret voice whispered in the depths of her soul that her conjectures had fallen into the right channel;—and gradually, gradually did a light dawn in upon her hitherto unsophisticated mind, leading her to a sort of glimmering notion of the probability that the Canon was enamoured of her and had adopted the present means of making her his own.

Now that her speculations as to the author and the cause of her captivity had at length settled into a definite idea, she was relieved of much of the anguish of suspense on the one hand, although her terrors were grievously augmented on the other. For she now pictured to herself a lengthened captivity: she fancied, in her artless innocence, that the Reverend Bernard Audley purposed to enforce her consent to become his wife;—and although her suspicions had travelled thus far, she did not dream that any darker and deeper outrage could be meditated against her. Her purity of soul raised a barrier to the progress of her ideas when they had reached a certain point; but the apprehension of a forced marriage with Bernard Audley was still enough to overwhelm with despair the heart that was filled with the image of Jocelyn Lofius.

But she was now, if possible, more than ever animated with the idea of escape: and this fervid longing—this profound yearning to free herself from so shocking a captivity, became enhanced into a hope that she would succeed in her endeavour. Rising from her seat, she hurriedly arranged her dishevelled hair and her disordered dress—and then once more began narrowly and closely to scrutinize every feature of the chamber. While she was thus engaged, a thought struck her. If so much precaution had been adopted to make the walls impervious to all sounds, either from within or from without, it was fair to infer that in the absence of these precautions such sounds would have free issue. In other words, if she were now to raise an alarm, the baize and the wool-wadding would deaden it: but if the baize and the wool-wadding were removed, her screams would perhaps bring succour to her aid.

She resolved therefore to tear away the barrier

which seemed intended to confine the voice of anguish to within those four walls: and she reflected that even if she should fail in attaining her aim, the circumstances of her captivity could not be rendered worse. At all events she was resolved to make the attempt and abide the issue, whatever it should be: and her mind being thus made up, she found herself animated with a degree of courage and hope that enabled her to commence her task with an energy exceeding her expectations.

We have already observed that the supper-tray was left in the chamber: and to this circumstance was Louisa indebted for the means of carrying out her design. Taking up the knife, she proceeded to cut away the baize from the wall; and, as she had already suspected, she found a thick inner coating of compressed woollen wadding. The task was comparatively an easy one: and in half-an-hour she had cut away and torn down the baize and the lining from the whole of the lower part of one side of the room. The chamber was strewn with the fragments—a cloud of dust filled the place—and Louisa paused to drink a large draught of water to cool her parched throat.

Having rested for a few minutes, the persevering girl returned to her task, and began the work of demolition on that side of the room against which the head of the couch stood. But she had not long toiled in this quarter, when she perceived a door set in the wall, and hitherto covered over with the green baize. A brighter gleam of hope than that which had just inspired her, now shot athwart her brain: and seizing the lamp, she examined the door with mingled eagerness and suspense. It was fastened: but the lock was on the side which she was thus contemplating;—and although the key was not there, she still saw a possibility of opening the door by unscrewing the lock itself. This she succeeded in accomplishing by means of the knife—though not without bruising and cutting her delicate fingers.

Scarcely had she removed the last screw of the lock, when the sound of a church-clock striking the hour, reached her ears. She paused and listened. Counting the strokes, she ascertained that it was midnight: and then she suddenly recollected that the tones of the bell, which from the first had seemed familiar to her, were those of Canterbury Cathedral!

She was therefore a captive in the immediate vicinage of this sacred edifice: and this discovery confirmed her suspicion that she was in the house of the Reverend Bernard Audley! But the sound of that bell had also ratified another idea which she had formed—namely, that by the removal of the lining of the walls, no obstruction would exist to the ingress or egress of such sounds as are loud enough to penetrate ordinary barriers of brick and mortar.

But Louisa did not waste in mere reflection that time every moment of which was so valuable for positive action. She had removed the locks—she could open the door. It yielded to her hand; and, taking the light with her, she hastened to ascertain whither this channel of communication led. Proceeding cautiously, but with a suspense so painful that the beatings of her heart were clearly audible, she passed from the dismantled chamber of her captivity into a large place totally unfurnished and resembling a loft. Then she recollected that the floor on which these apartments were situated must be at the top of the house, inasmuch as there was a sky-light on the ceiling of the room into which the barred casement of the green-baize chamber looked.

Traversing the loft with noiseless step, she reached a rude staircase, which she descended: and at the bottom she found herself on a small landing where there were three doors. She now took off her shoes in order that she might continue her way even more stealthily than at first: and as the stairs which she next descended were carpetted, her tread was light and aerial as that of a spirit.

All was still throughout the house: had a pin dropped, she would have heard it. In a few moments she reached another landing, where there were also three doors: but they were closed—and not a sound, not a voice, came from within either of the rooms to which these doors belonged. On this landing there was a window—and Louisa paused for a moment to look out. Holding the lamp within the shade off the wall, and lifting the blind, she gazed forth. The night was beautiful and star-lit—and in front of the casement a huge black mass of building stretched right and left. Louisa instantaneously recognised the cathedral:—and all doubt, even if any had remained in her mind, now vanished as to the fact that she was in the large and gloomy dwelling of the Reverend Bernard Audley.

Slowly replacing the blind, the maiden continued her way down the last flight of stairs: but scarcely had she come within sight of the hall at the bottom, when she was struck with mingled terror and despair on observing a light streaming from a room the door of which stood partially open. A sense of utter annihilation of all hope seized upon her with a force that was almost overwhelming: but repressing the ejaculation that rose to her lips and gathering all the elements of her scattered courage, she resolved to continue her way.

Her step was noiseless as she descended the few remaining stairs leading down into the hall. Thence there was a stair-case to the kitchen: but if the servants had not yet retired to rest, Louisa could scarcely hope for safe egress in that direction. Besides, she was not sure that there was any means of issue from those lower regions at all. What was she to do? The front door of the house was before her—at a distance of only a few yards: but in order to reach it she must pass by the room-door that stood open and whence the light issued. Delay, however, was dangerous: hesitation could not do otherwise than increase the perils which environed her!

She accordingly resolved to try the venture by the front door. Placing the lamp upon the stairs, and still carrying her shoes in her hand, she advanced with the lightness of a sylph. Her step was noiseless upon the cold marble—her dress rustled not. She passed the door that stood open, and flung a rapid and frightened glance into the room. The Canon of Canterbury Cathedral was seated at a table, on which were wine decanters, glasses, and dishes of fruit. He was reading—and his face was flushed with drinking.

All this Louisa saw at a glance: and, unobserved by the Reverend Bernard Audley, she passed on

and reached the front door. But to her dismay, she found it locked—and the key was not there!

With a sickening sensation at the heart and a cold tremor passing all over her, she felt as if she were about to faint. But once again summoning all her presence of mind to her aid, she revolved in an instant the only alternatives that now lay before her. One was to throw herself at the Canon's feet and demand his mercy: the other was to descend into the lower regions of the establishment in the hope of finding a means of egress. She decided upon this latter course—because, if it failed, it would then be time to appeal to the Reverend Bernard Audley, or else endeavour to raise an alarm by shrieks and cries.

Once more traversing the hall, and passing unperceived by the door of the parlour in which the clergyman was seated with his book and his wine, Louisa resumed possession of the lamp and descended the kitchen stairs. Not a sound was heard—not a voice met her ears; and she felt assured that the servants must have retired to rest. This she considered to be the more probable on account of the lateness of the hour.

On reaching the bottom of the stairs, she paused and listened. Then, as the silence remained unbroken, she began to explore the basement-premises of the building. Advancing a few steps—then pausing to listen—then advancing again—now trembling all over—then with suspended breath and upheaved bosom,—now shading the light with her hand—then holding it high up to throw its beams forward,—thus was it that the maiden passed through an infinity of anxieties and alarms, all in the space of a few short minutes.

She had the satisfaction, however, of becoming assured that the servants had retired to rest: and her search was presently rewarded by the discovery of a door leading into a yard at the back of the house. But scarcely had she opened this door, when

at the very instant she was about to cross the threshold, she heard the sounds of footsteps in the hall above. The blood congealed in her veins: and transfixed to the spot with dire terror, she listened almost in a statue-like state of suspended animation. But in a few moments she was relieved from that anguish of terror, by the certainty that the Rev. Bernard Audley, whose steps she had heard, was ascending the stairs from the hall.

"Now, young beauty—now, sweet and ravishing, lovely and enchanting Louisa——"

These were the words which he spoke aloud, as he began the ascent of the stairs, and which reached the ears of the trembling maiden below. She paused to listen no longer: but, wild with new terrors, she rushed from the doorway—sprang across the yard—and stopped only when she found herself close by an open arch in the massive wall of the Cathedral, There she was recalled to herself—for she was well enough acquainted with the interior of the sacred edifice to perceive in a moment that this open archway led into the vast subterranean, or crypt, of the venerable cathedral.

This immense assemblage or succession of vaults extends under nearly half of the spacious structure, and is lighted in the day-time by a few arched windows and loop-holes on a level with the ground. From one or two of these the panes, shafts, and bars are broken away; and thus any one who gains ingress to the cathedral precincts, may steal through these dismantled apertures into the crypt. But there is no similar means of egress in any other part: and thus Louisa knew well that even if she entered the crypt by the archway now before her, she must remain in the subterranean until the doors of the church should be opened in the morning.

Shuddering at the idea of passing the rest of the night in that place of sepulchral gloom, the maiden threw her eyes hastily around the yard to ascertain if there were no other avenue of escape: but she could see none. And now it suddenly struck her that as the Canon ascended the stairs of his house, if he only happened to look forth from the landing-window,—the same whence she had so recently beheld the Cathedral's black mass stretching before her view,—he could not fail to observe the light which she carried in her hand. She therefore hesitated no longer—but boldly, or rather desperately, entered the low arch and in a few moments was in the vast subterranean.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CRYPT.

Hurrying away from the spot where she had thus entered the gloomy place, she plunged farther into the crypt—passed by pillar after pillar—and at length sank exhausted upon a mass of stone-work at the base of one of the low columns supporting the roof.

Standing the lamp upon the ground, she covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. The prolonged excitement which she had endured, from the first moment when she commenced the task of tearing away the green baize in her prison-chamber, until she thus sate down in the vaulted subterranean of the cathedral, — this prolonged excitement, we say, which had wrung her heart's chords to their utmost powers of tension, now gave way in a passionate flood of weeping.

But these tears relieved her: they afforded a channel for the issue and flow of her pent-up feelings;—and presently wiping her eyes, she was enabled to fix her thoughts once more upon the circumstances of her position.

She knew that at an early hour in the morning the persons having charge of the cathedral would open the doors not only of the nave and choir alone, but also of the crypt, inasmuch as the edifice was daily inspected by visitors. She could then easily find an opportunity of passing out unobserved and unquestioned, even if she did not choose to relate the outrage which had been perpetrated upon her liberty and whence she had escaped. But on the other hand, if in the meantime the Canon should discover her flight from the baize-chamber and should track her into the crypt, she would be as much in his power as ever. And those words which she had heard him utter as he ascended the stairs of his house—what did they mean?—what portent did they shadow forth? He had said, "*Now*, young beauty,"—the monosyllable "*now*" being spoken emphatically, as if he meant something at that moment. Louisa shuddered as she thus reflected upon his words and wondered what their significancy could be: and she began to entertain some vague and undefined suspicion that he possibly harboured intentions more vile and dreadful than any she had previously conceived.

Scarcely had this thought struck her, when she was startled by the sounds of footsteps echoing through the vaulted subterranean. She sprang from her seat: like a carved effigy of mingled terror and despair did she stand against the pillar; —and with eyes dilated wildly, lips apart, and distended neck, she listened as if life or death depended upon the issue. All was still—and she began to breathe again. With long heavings and deep sinkings, her fair bosom denoted the return of that animation which had been as it were suspended throughout the rest of her frame to be all condensed in the faculty of hearing. But ere the tide of life had again obtained full play in its crimson channels, those ominous sounds once more reached her ears: once more, also, was she transfixed—petrified—turned into a statue with the spell of dread consternation.

Again however all was still—but her imagination was now so fearfully excited and her brain so troubled, that she began to conjure up all kinds of horrible shapes and spectral forms. From the ground appeared to rise those ghastly shapes,—some dressed in their grave-clothes—others wearing the garb of priests,—some appearing to be only skeletons wrapped in the loose garments of the dead—and others looking like grim warriors in their steel panoply. Whichever way she cast her eyes around, objects of terror seemed to encounter them; and those spectral shapes increased in number until the whole crypt appeared to be crowded with them. But suddenly the immense array of phantoms melted into thin air—and one tall dark form stood forth from behind an adjacent pillar.

"My brain is reeling—and yet 'tis all a delusion —and I know it!" exclaimed Louisa aloud, as she closed her eyes and pressed her fingers upon her

throbbing brows: then opening her eyes again, she gave vent to a piercing shriek as she beheld the Minor Canon standing before her.

"Silly maiden, what a foolish course have you pursued!" said the Reverend Bernard Audley, adopting his most soothing tone and conciliating manner—for by Louisa's flight the affair had taken a turn which he had little anticipated and which to a certain degree had deranged his plans.

She did not however hear the words which he had just addressed to her. Overcome with terror and dismay at finding herself once more, as she feared, in the hands of her persecutor, she had sunk against the pillar to which she was now clinging for support: and although she fainted not, nor fell senseless—yet was there a confusion in her thoughts and a hurry in her brain that subdued the natural working of her faculties and made her feel as if she were under the influence of a strange and incomprehensible dream.

We will here pause for a moment to give a few necessary explanations relative to the conduct and intentions of the Minor Canon. He had bribed certain gipsies to carry off Louisa; and he had ordered them to manage the abduction in such a manner that she might not know to whose house she was taken, nor in what part of Canterbury it was situated. Hence the circuitous route followed by the vehicle on the preceding evening. When once safe in his hands, the infamous parson scrupled not how he should behave towards her; and in his housekeeper, who was known as Mrs. Dorothy, he had a willing instrument and efficient auxiliary. The wine and the malt liquour which accompanied the dinner-tray that was carried up to Louisa's room, were both drugged: but fortunately the young lady partook of nothing at the time. The coffee served up to her at tea-time, was also drugged: but again she escaped the snare by declining any refreshment. The third experiment was made with the wine and the malt liquor which were placed upon the supper-tray: and Mrs. Dorothy reported to her master that "she felt sure the young girl would take either a glass of wine or ale, as she was now evidently worn out and thoroughly exhausted." In this hope was it that the supper-things had been left in the baize-chamber: but we have seen that Louisa only partook of a draught of the spring-water, which it was impossible to drug. The Minor Canon, however, relied upon his housekeeper's assurance, and sate up with the intention of waiting until the drugged liquor should have taken the hoped-for effect upon the maiden. He accordingly sate up, inflaming his imagination with wine and with some voluptuous romance, until his passions became ungovernable. He then ascended to the baize-chamber, in the expectation of beholding his victim stretched upon the couch in a profound lethargy;—and it was when about to mount the stairs that he had given utterance to the words which had fallen so ominously on Louisa's ears and subsequently struck her with so dubious a meaning. But his rage on reaching the room and beholding the evidences of her escape, may be better imagined than described: and his terror was even greater than his fury.

Yes—his alarm was more poignant than his disappointment. For had he succeeded in making himself the master of her person when under the influence of a narcotic, he would have had her transported back to her own cottage-garden ere day-break, and while still steeped in lethargy. She would then have remained in ignorance whither she had been taken, and who was the author of the outrage. If her suspicions fell upon him, his character for sanctity and excellent reputation would at once give the lie to the imputation;—and his housekeeper, to avoid being recognised by the young lady, might easily visit London, or go elsewhere for a short time.

Such was the plan which the Reverend Bernard Audley had deeply meditated—darkly resolved—and confidently hoped to carry out successfully. But Louisa's flight not only upset all his calculations and baffled his sensual hopes, but suddenly defeated all his precautions, and raised up a thousand dangers around him. For, of course, she had discovered, or must eventually discover, from whose house it was that she had thus fled: and to be enabled to speak with certainty on the point, and give circumstantial details of the mode of her flight and the exact route taken, would inevitably establish the truth of her tale beyond all possibility of contradiction.

Such were the reflections which swept through the mind of the Reverend Bernard Audley as he hastened in pursuit of the fugitive maiden. The door of the loft being left open, convinced him that she must have descended the stairs; and the door leading into the yard being also wide open, furnished another clue to her progress. That she had entered the crypt was the next idea that struck him; and thither he accordingly followed her, with the success which has already been described.

"Silly maiden—what a foolish course you have pursued!" were the words which he addressed to her in a conciliatory tone: but she heard them not, and only gazed on him with mingled wildness and vacancy as she clung to the pillar.

The dim light of the lamp revealed to his eyes the marble pallor of her lovely countenance—while his own features were alike flushed with drinking and agitated with evil passions.

"Maiden, do you hear me?" he said, grasping her wrist.

"Unhand me, sir!" she cried, now suddenly startled by that touch into a full recollection of all that had occurred and an acute sense of her present position.

"Louisa, Louisa," exclaimed the Reverend Bernard Audley, "I beseech you to hear—and to forgive me," he added, with a tone and manner of well-assumed meekness.

"You have no doubt behaved very wickedly towards me, sir," replied the maiden: "but if you sincerely and earnestly express your contrition——"

"By heaven! I regret what I have done," he exclaimed; "and you must attribute it to that boundless affection with which you have inspired me. Come—return with me into my house—I promise you honourable and safe escort on my part to the front door——"

"No, sir—no!" ejaculated Louisa, a sudden presentiment inspiring her with the dread that he was deceiving her: then, as the deepening flush upon his cheeks and the confusion of his looks at once ratified the suspicion, she said, "I will remain here until the morning—and if you dare to harm me, I will send forth such piercing cries as shall arouse the whole neighbourhood."

"Foolish girl!" thundered the Minor Canon, assuming an air of diabolical menace,—"you will force me to extremes! Look around you—behold the utter loneliness of this place. No human eye witnesses us: but how many spectral forms and invisible phantoms may be looking forth upon us from amidst the dense obscurity of these vaulted regions and the black darkness of its remotest nooks. Now, Louisa, Louisa—you behold before you a desperate man! His honour—his fame—his character—almost his very life—these are in your hands: and unless you kneel and swear by the great God who rules in heaven—by the shades of the departed monks and warriors whose remains lie buried beneath our feet or entombed in the cloisters overhead—by all your hopes of happiness in this world and of salvation in the next;—unless, I say, you kneel and swear by all these that you will never reveal to a living soul aught of what has occurred to you in my house or at my hands——"

"No, no—I cannot take that oath!" interrupted Louisa, whose blood had run cold at the terms in which it was couched. "Besides, I will deal frankly with you—there is one to whom I must, for my own sake, reveal all that has occurred: otherwise I could not account for my absence from home, of which he must inevitably hear on his return to Canterbury——"

"Ah! you allude to Jocelyn Loftus—my rival in your love?" muttered the Minor Canon, with a terrible scowl of hatred: then, subduing his bitter feelings—or rather the outward manifestation of them—as well as he was able, he added, "But is it absolutely necessary for you to make him your confidant in this respect? What purpose will it serve to excite his angry feelings against me?—what good will it achieve to unsettle his mind with rancorous thoughts and vindictive emotions? Remember, young lady, that wherever a battle is to be fought, two must fight it—and that he whose cause is most just and who wins the day, does not always come off scatheless himself."

"Nevertheless," observed Louisa, her courage reviving since she beheld a disposition on the part of the Canon to become the suppliant and to back his proposals of compromise by means of a sophistry which betrayed even to her inexperienced comprehension the alarm that really lurked at the bottom of his mind,—"nevertheless," she said, "I must deal frankly and candidly with Mr. Loftus, be the consequences what they may. At the same time," she added almost immediately, "I think I can undertake to promise that he will forbear from any course which may tend to give publicity to this wicked outrage, provided you——"

"Oh! now you are dictating conditions to me, girl!" exclaimed the Canon, flying into an ungovernable passion. "By heaven! I will sacrifice you to my safety—aye, and to my vengeance also—unless you take the oath which I have already prescribed! Yes—and without reserve or exception, I say," he added, ferociously. "Down—down—upon your knees, insolent girl—down, I command you——"

His looks were terrible with the rage and fury of a desperate man—the foam of a species of hydrophobic madness was upon his lips—and if he stopped short in the midst of his fiercely uttered words, it was not because he had nothing more to say, but because his throat grew so suddenly parched and his tongue so hot that he gasped and panted violently.

Louisa's firmness abandoned her in a moment: she was appalled and horror-stricken;—and sinking upon her knees, she raised her clasped hands and lifted her dilated eyes, exclaiming, "Mercy! mercy!"

"I will show no mercy—I can know none!" said the Canon, in a hoarse and ominous voice. "Take the oath which I have dictated—swear to observe an eternal secrecy with regard to the incidents of this night—or——"

"No, no—you may kill me——Oh! you may kill me," shrieked the anguished girl,—"but I will not take that dreadful oath!"

"Then, by heavens! you shall go back to your prison-chamber in my house," exclaimed the Reverend Bernard Audley: "and I will *starve* you into compliance with my wishes—into obedience with my commands!"

And as he thus spoke he sprang forward and wound his arms about the sylphid form of the kneeling girl. A piercing scream burst from her lips: but one of his hands was instantaneously placed upon her mouth—and, despite of her struggles, he was bearing her away from the spot, when a female figure, clothed in black, suddenly appeared from behind the pillars.

"Ah! my evil genius!" ejaculated the Minor Canon—and he let Louisa fall from his arms.

Her forehead struck upon the hard ground—(for the crypt was not paved)—and she instantaneously became insensible.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

When Louisa awoke to consciousness, she was lying undressed in a bed—and a candle was burning in the room.

A crowd of terrible reminiscences rushed into her brain;—and wildly she cast her eyes around her. But all her apprehensions were soothed in a few moments—all her fears were dissipated—when she discovered that she was safe in her own chamber at the cottage. A certain painful sensation on the forehead caused her, however, to lift her hand to her throbbing brow—and her fair fingers encountered a bandage. Ah! then all those terrible reminiscences were not a dream: but everything which now was uppermost in her mind, bore the impress of reality! Her captivity—her flight—the scenes in the cathedral crypt,—all were true:—but how had her deliverance been effected?

While she was yet lost in conjecture, the servant-girl Mary entered the room: and perceiving that her young mistress was awake, she precipitated herself towards her—caught her in her arms—and embraced her with a fervour that evinced the depth and sincerity of her attachment.

"How long have I been here?—and who brought me home?" were Louisa's first questions.

"An hour has elapsed since you were brought back in a deep swoon, Miss," was the reply. "It is now three o'clock in the morning——"

"And my aunt—my poor aunt—how is she?" inquired the maiden, hurriedly.

"As usual, Miss. Of course I have let her want for nothing—I have done my best to attend upon her, although terribly grieved at your absence——"

"And are there any letters, Mary?" demanded Louisa, a gentle blush appearing upon her cheeks which were previously as pale as marble.

"Yes—one, Miss:"—and the servant presented her with the letter, holding the candle near the bed at the same time so as to enable her young mistress to read it.

Louisa instantaneously recognised the handwriting of Jocelyn: and the roscate tinge deepened upon her lovely countenance as she read the following lines:—

"Piazza Hotel, Covent Garden, London.
"*Tuesday evening, Sept. 17th.*

"My ever dearest Louisa,

"I have arrived in this great city just in time to save the post with these few words, which I pen for the purpose of convincing you that your loved image is ever uppermost in my thoughts. To-morrow I shall call upon your sister in Stratton Street, and will write to you again. I hope to be able to return to Canterbury on Friday, or Saturday at latest.

"Your sincerely affectionate and faithful
"JOCELYN LOFTUS."

"Dearest Jocelyn!" murmured Louisa to herself, as a thrill of holy ecstacy penetrated her heart: then, placing the letter under her pillow, she said, "And now, Mary, before I give you an account of the causes of my absence, tell me all you may have to communicate. Was not some message delivered to you on Tuesday night to account for my sudden disappearance?—and under what circumstances was I just now brought home again?"

"I will tell you all I know, Miss," returned the faithful and affectionate domestic. "The clock in the kitchen had struck ten on Tuesday evening when I thought that you were staying out a long time in the garden—and I began to fear you would catch cold. I accordingly went out to seek you: but you were nowhere to be found. I was very uneasy, but still fancied that you might have gone out for a walk and strolled farther than usual. Three quarters of an hour passed; and then a strange old crone, looking like a gipsy, called at the gate and said that she had come with a message from Miss Louisa Stanley. I asked her what the message was; and she said you had gone to stay two or three days with some lady-friends of Mr. Loftus, in the neighbourhood of Canterbury, and that there was no cause to be alarmed at your absence. She then hurried away: but I confess that I was by no means satisfied—for I thought this was very unlike your usual conduct, Miss. However, there was no help for it: but I passed a sleepless night. All day yesterday I was still more uneasy—and the longer I thought of your absence and the strange message, the more alarmed I got. When night came again, I could not for the life of me go to bed: I was restless, feverish, and ill. So I sat by the side of your poor aunt, Miss—and then I went down into the kitchen—and everything looked so lonely and dull, I didn't know what to do. It seemed as if there'd been a death in the house. But I won't spin my story out longer than I need. I was sitting by the kitchen fire as the clock struck two—and then I thought that I must go to bed or I should be too ill to-morrow to attend on your aunt. But just as I had come to this determination a carriage drove up to the gate; and I ran out in the hope that you had come back. So you had—but in a deep swoon: and a gentleman and a lady who were inside, told me that you had met with some accident—but I didn't hear exactly what they said, for I was so flurried and frightened to see you in such a state. The lady got out and helped me to carry you up-stairs; and when we had undressed you, she gave gave me a sealed note, saying, '*When your young mistress has recovered her composure, bid her read this.*'—She then went away and returned to the carriage which instantly drove off."

"Where is the note?" inquired Louisa, with mingled curiosity and suspense.

"Here, Miss," said the servant. "I would not give it you at first, till I had told you my story—because from what the lady in black said, I feared it contained something that might ruffle your feelings."

"The lady in black!" echoed Louisa, struck by the reminiscence that it was a female clad in deep mourning who had appeared so suddenly in the crypt.

"Yes—she was a tall lady, dressed in black," answered the servant: "but as she had her veil down, and it was a very thick one, I could not see her face. But her voice was sweet and mild—Oh! so mild, and also so melancholy, that flurried though I was, it quite touched me."

"And the gentleman who was with her in the carriage?" said Louisa, inquiringly.

"Oh! I couldn't see his face at all," was the response. "He remained inside the vehicle—and as it was then quite dark and the moon had gone down, I only saw his figure as one may say—but his voice was agitated and nervous."

Louisa now opened the note which the maid-servant had given her; and she found that it contained the following lines, penned in an elegant female handwriting:—

"The lady who is instrumental in delivering Miss Louisa Stanley from a most outrageous and unjustifiable persecution, ventures to plead on behalf of the offender. She is well aware that Miss Stanley's feelings must be excited to a most painful degree of indignation, and that she will probably deem it her duty to communicate all the facts to those friends on whose counsel she is accustomed to rely. But the writer of this note earnestly implores Miss Stanley not only to deal leniently with the offender, but also to urge her friends to throw the veil of oblivion upon the matter. This is the only reward which the writer seeks or asks for delivering Miss Stanley from a serious danger and restoring her to her home: but she may confidently add that Miss Stanley has no occasion to apprehend a repetition of the outrage, nor any farther molestation or insult from the same quarter."

"This is an appeal to my generosity—and it shall not be made in vain," thought Louisa to herself. "Nevertheless, for my own sake, I must give the fullest explanations to my faithful servant now, and to Jocelyn when he returns. But I will place the seal of silence upon their lips."

Having thus mused upon the course which she should adopt, the young lady proceeded to detail her adventures to the ear of her maid, who was shocked, surprised, and indignant at the treatment to which her beloved mistress had been subjected. She however agreed with Louisa that it would be ungenerous towards the lady in black not to comply with an appeal that was couched in terms of so much delicate earnestness. Secrecy and silence were therefore resolved upon—the more readily, too, inasmuch as the lady's note contained so positive an assurance against any future cause of alarm.

As for the blow which Louisa had received from her fall in the crypt, its effect had been rather to stun than injure her: there was a slight abrasion of the skin, and some blood had trickled forth—but there was no fear of any scar remaining to injure her beauty.

CHAPTER XXII.

JACOB'S ISLAND.

At the point where Bermondsey joins Rotherhithe on the bank of the Thames, there is a spot which contains in a very narrow compass all the most frightful elements of crime, demoralization, pauperism, wretchedness, and pestilence. Many vile and miserable neighbourhoods are there in London—many horrible and poverty-stricken districts—many quarters steeped in filth, feculence, and squalor: but St. Giles's and Saffron Hill—Whitechapel and Bethnal Green—the Almonry of Westminster and the Mint of Southwark,—all these are elysiums and paradises in comparison with Jacob's Island.

For the better comprehension of those readers who are but indifferently acquainted with the topography of this large metropolis, we shall observe that in the south-eastern district there are two immense parishes joining each other, and known as Bermondsey and Rotherhithe. On passing over London Bridge into Southwark, turn to the left—proceed along Tooley Street—and thence may you plunge into all that maze of narrow streets, dirty lanes, and wretched courts which constitute Bermondsey and are prolonged eastward under the name of Rotherhithe. In those districts may be seen the bustle of warehouses mingling with the incessant activity of petty commerce—the huge wain of the wholesale merchant blocking up the narrow thoroughfare against the progress of the costermonger's cart—the important-looking clerk jostling against the small dealer—the creaking crane drawing up immense bales to some well-stored loft, and the light cart delivering in bundles of wood or small packages of grocery at the peddling chandler's shop. But for the most part the houses are poor in appearance—often dilapidated—and dingy, dirty, and uninviting everywhere. Whole streets contain nothing but the poorest, most wretched, and most beggarly shops; while a glance under the arch-ways of the numerous courts causes a shudder to pass over the frame at the bare idea that so many human beings should be compelled to herd together in wretchedness and squalor there.

Such is the general impression made upon the mind by the aspect of Bermondsey and Rotherhithe. But bad, unpleasant, and repulsive as these districts are,—in no one respect do they adequately prepare the mind for the loathsome horrors, the hideousness, and the pestilential scenes which are presently to meet the eyes of the individual who explores his way to Jacob's Island.

We have supposed that on leaving London Bridge, you turn into Tooley Street: this is sufficiently broad and open, though dirty and repulsive withal—and a glance into any of the diverging lanes will afford a glimpse of the wretchedness, misery, and squalor that exist behind the lofty warehouses and vast commercial repositories of that thoroughfare. Well, continue your way along Freeschool and Thornton Streets—and you will debouch upon the top of Mill Street. Pause—and look around you! Think of the palaces of Belgravia—and contemplate these dens of wretchedness which now meet your eyes, and where the poor are crammed together as thickly as the herrings in those tubs which you have previously seen in Tooley Street. Think of the mansions of the rich at the West End—and survey the hovels, the courts, and the lanes where all is misery, misery, misery! Remember the fresh air which blows from the green parks into the casements and through the Venetian blinds of the palatial homes of the British aristocracy—and then mark the noxious atmosphere which hangs, dull and stagnant like a plague-mist, upon the neighbourhood which you are exploring.

All this is bad enough, you will say: but it is nothing—absolutely nothing—to what yet remains in the path of your researches. Go on—proceed down Mill Street towards the Thames—and presently you will observe, upon your right hand, a spectacle that must force from your lips an ejaculation expressive of wonderment, horror, and dismay that such a scene should exist in the capital of England and in the middle of the nineteenth century!

But what is this hideous—this appalling—this loathsome scene which you thus behold? It is Jacob's Island.

Hemmed in as it were by warehouses, landing wharves, and other repositories of commerce, this rookery might almost escape the notice of the wanderer in that part of the metropolis, were not his attention especially directed towards it. From the Thames it is screened by the warehouses forming the line called Bermondsey Walk: but on approaching it by way of Mill Street, its horrors and loathsomeness begin to develop themselves to the shocked and disgusted gaze, like some hideous reptile slowly uncoiling its slimy folds, while the air feels tainted and sickly with its venomous breath.

Conceive a black ditch, about twenty feet in width, forming a complete quadrangle, with lines of hovels upon the outer banks, and a dense assemblage of similar wretched dwellings on the insulated square within the boundary. Such, in a few words, is Jacob's Island. But not all the languages in the universe can supply terms strong enough to convey an adequate idea of the misery of the place. It must be seen, to be properly understood. The ditch is crossed in several places by means of rotten, ricketty wooden bridges: and to stand upon one of them for only a few moments, is to inhale a noxious vapour which makes the stomach sick and the heart heave. The houses are built partly of brick and partly of wood, and literally seem all tumbling to pieces. They look as if they were about to give way and fall in with one universal smash. The brickwork is so dingy and the woodwork so blackened, that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins: there seems an utter confusion in the architecture and an incomprehensible jumbling of materials.

These hovels have for the most part only one storey above the ground-floor: and the ground-floors themselves are lower than the level of the soil, as if they all sloped towards the ditch which the back rooms overlook. Many of the habitations project over the ditch, and are supported by upright posts, or piles, driven into the dyke's muddy bed: and where the houses are thus arranged, they have small galleries or enclosed places, serving the purpose of back-yards in every possible respect. The general appearance of the place is that of an assemblage of blackened hovels of the most miserable description; and no humane person would consent to allow a favourite dog or cat to harbour there. Yet this district, with its stagnant ditch and its pestilential atmosphere, is swarming with human life—men, women, and children herding

there as in the other poor neighbourhoods of London. Aye—and that ditch, so black in hue and so fetid in odour, is alike their common sewer and the source of the water which they drink: they not only inhale its sickly effluvia, but also imbibe its poisonous draughts. To say after this that it washes their clothes and cooks their food, were to add nothing more horrible—more revolting—more abominable, to the fact already mentioned—namely that it is the only water the poor wretches have to drink!

We have said that the ditch is stagnant—and it is well nigh so: for although there is a means of communication with the Thames, yet this channel is monopolised by a paper-mill, or some manufacturing establishment: and it is only now and then that the river water is allowed to replenish the waste of the black ditch. But were this ditch regularly to empty and refill itself with the ebb and flow of the Thames, it could not possibly be purified: its bed is so deep in mud and slime, that the force of a cataract, and not the languid ebb of a tidal current, would be needed to cleanse the Augean accumulation of filth.

It may be readily undertood, from what we have previously stated, that the houses of Jacob's Island are very low: none of the rooms, either on the ground-floor or the upper storey, are high enough for a tall man to stand upright. Few of them have regular staircases: a rude ladder serves in most instances to ascend from below. On entering at the small and narrow street-door, there is a sharp descent in the passage—thus indicating that slope towards the ditch which has already been mentioned.

The inhabitants of Jacob's Island are, as a matter of course, the poorest of the poor—the most wretched of the wretched. Misery and demoralization have made their homes in that appalling spot: pestilence and plague are ever smouldering in that hideous region. Pale, sickly, emaciated women may be seen hanging out their bits of linen and rags of clothes from the windows looking upon the ditch, or else drawing up the slimy water itself in pails or cans which they lower by means of ropes from the overhanging galleries. Famished, wan, and moping children, wasted to skeletons, and whose countenances look deadly white even through the layer of dirt and grime upon them, crawl about in various directions, displaying none of those exuberant spirits which characterise the children of even the poorest persons in other neighbourhoods. Disease has fastened upon their vitals from the moment of their birth: they live in a pestilential atmosphere—they drink poisoned water—and although they may grow up to be men and women, yet will they die prematurely and be laid in early graves. As for the men whom you see in Jacob's Island—they are as miserable in appearance as their wives and their offspring;—and on every countenance may be read the hideous influence of that mephitic vapour which, ever exhaling from the quadrangular ditch, envelopes the whole island in a plague-mist which though unseen is deeply felt.

Oh! when we think that seventy thousand pounds were given a few years back to build stables and kennels for the horses and dogs of Royalty,—and when we reflect that a quarter of that sum would have served to sweep away the whole of Jacob's Island, fill up the loathsome ditch, and build healthy, cheerful, fitting dwellings upon the site of present wretchedness and abominations,—must we not wonder that no voice was raised in the legislative assembly to proclaim the infamy, the scandal, and the atrocity of thus providing handsomely for horses and dogs, while so many human beings were forced by stern compulsion and dire necessity to herd together upon that accursed spot! But what is a poor working man when the whim of Royalty is to be gratified?—what are his pale wife and emaciated children when a German Prince demands that his hunters with which he is afraid to hunt, and his hounds with which he has not skill enough to course, should be royally housed? O Prince Albert! we hope—sincerely hope—that in the Great Exhibition which your princely wisdom has most graciously concocted for 1851, you will not fail to have a model of Jacob's Island placed in some conspicuous part, with three or four *living* specimens of the human beings whom a cruel social system, the pressure of class-interests, and the influence of vile legislation have doomed to pine, languish, rot, and die prematurely, in that most loathsome spot upon the face of the whole earth.

But we will now resume the regular progress of our tale.

The reader will be kind enough to recollect—for it is necessary that we should be particular as to dates—that the festival at Lady Wenlock's at Kew, and the incidents of the baize chamber and the cathedral-crypt at Canterbury, all took place on the Wednesday night. We must therefore observe that it was on this same Wednesday night, or rather at about one o'clock on the Thursday morning,—that the knife-grinder, who has already figured in our narrative, slowly threaded his way along Mill Street towards Jacob's Island. He was as much begrimed with soot and his countenance was as completely disfigured with layers of black, as when we first introduced him to our readers: but he had not his perambulating shop with him on the present occasion.

Advancing along Mill Street in the direction of the Thames, he examined the premises on the right hand side, and in a few minutes turned into a little narrow passage which went shelving down towards the black ditch. It was arched — only just high enough for a man of ordinary stature—and scarcely wide enough for two persons to proceed abreast. It was paved for only the distance of a few feet—and then a flooring of wood suddenly made the knife-grinder aware that a portion of this alley actually overhung the ditch itself. The planks creaked beneath his feet; and on emerging from the passage, he entered upon a ricketty wooden bridge that spanned the dyke: and halting in the middle, he looked over the railings at the houses on his left hand.

The moon, riding high upon the arch of heaven, shone in unclouded splendour; and its beams brought out into full relief that section of Jacob's Island which the knife-grinder now contemplated. Like black marble with a shiny surface, was the stagnant ditch; and the low-pitched houses, with their sombre overhanging galleries, seemed the very places where crime was sure to be committed whenever opportunity might serve—while the deep bed of the dyke appeared only too readily suggestive of the means of disposing of all traces of even the darkest, deadliest deeds. The prospect was sinister in the extreme;—and if the knife-grinder had been a well-dressed person, with a gold chain pendant to his fob, he might have reasonably experienced no small anxiety to escape with all possible speed from such a neighbourhood.

But it was pretty evident that the knife-grinder was no stranger in this spot, and that he was not stand-

ing upon the bridge to contemplate the loathsome scene, but to catch any sounds that might emanate from the nearest house on his left hand. Nor was he disappointed in his expectations: for presently the din of uproarious mirth came vibrating upon his ears; and then, after a temporary lull of a few minutes, a voice was heard singing some flash song.

"Ah! the birds are all there," muttered the knife-grinder to himself. "I wasn't out in my calculation."

With this reflection, he retraced his way off the bridge—threaded the little arched passage once more—regained Mill Street—and knocked at the door of the house the back part of which he had just been watching from the bridge.

"Who's there?" demanded a gruff voice within.

"Tibby Blades, the knife-grinder," was the immediate response.

"Don't know you, my fine feller," returned the gruff voice in-doors. "What do you want?"

"I've got somethink wery particular to say to old Jeremy," was the rejoinder: "and I've been told he's here. That's all."

"Well—wait a minute," said the gruff voice: and the knife-grinder could hear heavy steps retreating along the passage within.

In a very short time, these steps retraced their way to the door, which was opened—and a fierce-looking fellow, with a candle in his hand, appeared just inside the passage. The knife-grinder immediately entered saying in a familiar tone, "Holloa, Mr. Bencull, is this you? How are you?"

The fierce-looking fellow shut the door—drew the bolt very carefully—put up a chain likewise—and then holding up the candle, stared the knife-grinder very hard in the face.

"I don't know you," he at length said in a sullen manner and with evident suspicion. "Where have we met afore?"

"Lor' bless ye, Mr. Bencull," exclaimed the knife-grinder, "such a famous feller as you are ain't unbeknown to even a poor devil like me. I've seen you at several of the flash cribs—Joe Parkes's on Saffron Hill—Meg Blowen's in the Almonry—Sharp Mawley's in the Mint—Polly Scratchem's over in Whitechapel——"

"Well, that'll do," growled Mr. Bencull. "It's very clear you know the flash cribs and boozing-kens; but so does a Bow Street runner:"—and again he stared long and hard at the knife-grinder.

"Eh! but a Bow Street runner don't wenture down at Mr. Bencull's dark crib in Mill Street, Jacob's Island," was the ready answer given by Tibby Blades the knife-grinder, who stood the savage-looking ruffian's survey without wincing.

"Well, that's true enow," observed Bencull, apparently satisfied and convinced: "cos if a runner or a thief-taker did come here—even if it was the celebrated and skilful Larry Sampson his-self—I'm blowed if he'd ever get out alive. A sharp knife drawn edgewise across the throat—an open window at the back of the house—and the black ditch underneath——by goles! that's the way to dispose of all waggabones of Larry Sampson's description."

"To be sure it is," answered the knife-grinder, again passing triumphantly through the ordeal of a long and searching survey on Mr. Bencull's part. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Sampson wants me for somethink I've done: but blowed if I wouldn't give him a couple of inches of cold steel before he should lay his mawleys on me."

"That's spoken like a man!" exclaimed Bencull, in a more familiar and friendly tone than he had yet adopted towards the knife-grinder. "You'll excuse me, my nibsome pal, for being a trifle suspicious at fust: but them Bow-street chaps does come such cursed rum dodges, you know——"

"Don't say another word about it, there's a fine feller," exclaimed Tibby Blades. "I dare say we shall be tidy friends afore long—when you come to know more of me. Lor' bless yer—there isn't a genelman's butler or footman at any country seat within ten miles round London that I hav'n't made keys for. You understand me?"

"All right!—wide awake!—tip us your mawley, pal," cried Mr. Bencull: then having shaken the knife-grinder by the hand, he said, "And now come along, and I'll introduce you to the company."

Tibby Blades accordingly followed the ruffian into the back room on the ground floor;—and there, by the light of a couple of tallow candles, and through a cloud of tobacco-smoke, were discovered several ill-looking men and two or three women of wanton and dissipated appearance.

"A new friend—Mr. Tibby Blades," exclaimed Bencull, doing the honours of introduction: and as the company felt assured that no one would be admitted unless he was "all right," they forthwith gave the knife-grinder a cordial welcome.

"Now, then, Mr. Bencull," said the new comer, tossing down a few shillings upon the table, "let's have some of your bingo, and bring me a brosely and some bird's-eye."

This figurative language, which meant nothing more nor less than that the knife-grinder proposed to treat the company with some brandy, and required a pipe and tobacco for himself, was instantaneously comprehended by Mr. Bencull, the landlord of the "dark crib:" and the articles thus ordered were forthwith supplied.

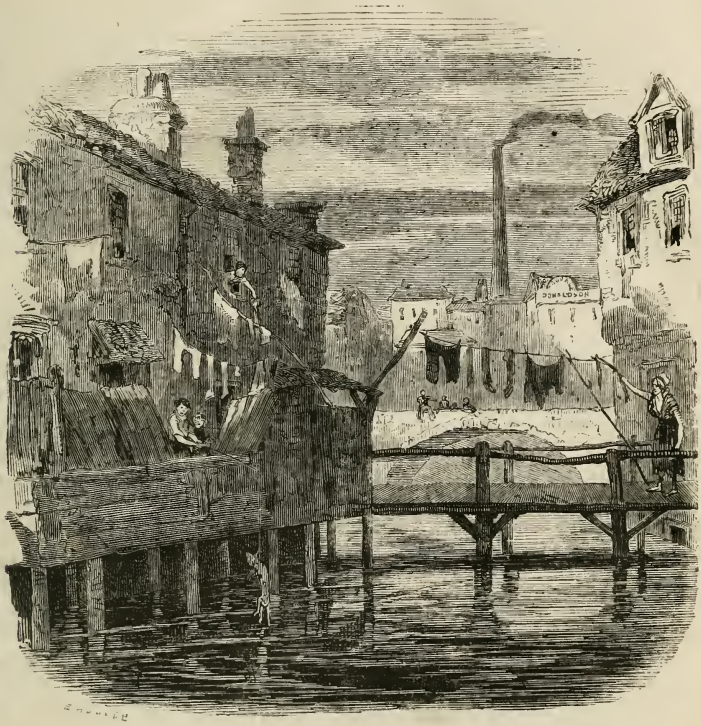
"But where's old Jeremy?" demanded Tibby Blades, glancing round upon the company. "I don't see him here?" he added inquiringly.

"He's up-stairs," returned Bencull: "and you can go to him. There—up the ladder—and lift the trap-door."

The knife-grinder, having tossed off a glass of brandy, and with his pipe in his mouth, proceeded to ascend the ladder; and raising the trap at the top, he introduced himself into a room the blackened walls and naked appearance of which were dimly shown by the light of a candle. The whole furniture of the chamber consisted of but a table and a couple of chairs: and it was at this table and in one of those chairs that old Jeremy was seated.

He was a man of about seventy years of age, without a tooth in his head, and with bleared eyes that added to the hideousness of his pale, shrivelled, wrinkled features. He was dressed in a seedy suit of black, and wore a white cravat—thus having the appearance of a decayed undertaker.

Previous to the knife-grinder's entrance into this chamber, old Jeremy was busily employed in examining some watches, rings, snuff-boxes, and other articles of jewellery, all of which were spread out upon the table. These, in fact, were the fruits of the predatory skill of the men and women down stairs;—and old Jeremy, who usually visited the dark crib once a week for the purpose, was putting a value upon the various articles. In plainer terms, he was a notorious "fence," or receiver of stolen goods: and he was now



JACOB'S ISLAND.

testing the gold by means of a chemical fluid, and marking upon a slip of paper the prices at which he proposed to purchase the jewels.

But when Tibby Blades lifted the trap-door, old Jeremy flung his handkerchief over the articles—not because he feared an intruder, but through a habit of precaution that was natural to him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DARK CRIB.

ALMOST immediately after the knife-grinder had ascended the ladder to the room above, another knock was heard at the street door of the house: and the landlord hastened to answer the summons.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Dan'el Coffin," was the immediate response: and the words were followed by a low and peculiar whistle.

"All right," said Bencull in a satisfactory tone: and opening the door, the Hangman entered the place.

"Well, Dan'el, how are you to-night?" inquired the landlord.

"Oh! hearty as a buck. Any company?"

"Yes—a few. But walk in."

Then, having secured the door, Bencull lighted the way into the back room, where Daniel Coffin the Hangman was received with an enthusiastic welcome on the part of the men and women assembled there. Indeed, as he stood in the middle of the room with his hat perched somewhat jauntily upon his head,—and as he surveyed the company to see who were present, and tapped his leg with a stick which he carried in his hand,—he seemed to all intents and purposes a fitting hero for the worship of such a group.

"Well, and how are you all, my pals?" he exclaimed, throwing himself upon a chair, and then coolly tossing off a glass of brandy which stood on the side of the table near him.

"All right, Mr. Coffin," answered one of the women. "Old Jeremy's up-stairs. You know it's his night to be here ——"

"That's just why I've come down to the Island now," observed the Hangman. "I want to see him about some particular business. Is he up-stairs?"

"Yes—but there's a chap with him," said Bencull.

"Oh! well—I can wait awhile—I'm in no hurry—'specially in such sweet company," he added, with a grin at the women, who laughed amazingly at the compliment.

"I dare say the knife-grinder won't be long," remarked Bencull.

"The knife-grinder!" exclaimed the Hangman, catching at the name: for he remembered what John the footman had told him relative to a worthy of that description, at the *King's Arms*, Richmond, on the preceding night.

"Yes: do you know anythink of him?" inquired Bencull, all his former suspicions instantaneously aroused again.

"Nothing bad, at all events," returned Daniel Coffin: "on the contrary, if it's the same that I mean, he must be a deuced good kind of a chap. But from what I was told, I don't think it is the same, because the one I'm speaking of is wanted in London by the beaks ——"

"And so is this feller," exclaimed Bencull: "he said so to me when he fust entered the crib just now. He says Larry Sampson has got a warrant out against him; but he's blowed if he won't give Larry an inch or two of cold steel afore he'd be logged off to quod by any such sneaking willain."

"Such a chap, then, would be a welcome recruit for our band," observed Coffin the Hangman. "I wonder what he's up to with old Jeremy? May be something in which we could lend him a little help, and of course go snacks."

"Why don't you step up-stairs and see if there's any way of insinuating yourself into the confidence of this Tibby Blades?" inquired Bencull.

"So I will," returned Daniel the Hangman: and he ascended the ladder accordingly.

Raising the trap-door a little and somewhat cautiously, he beheld the knife-grinder and old Jeremy sitting very close to each other and leaning forward so that there was not an interval of more than three inches between the soot-begrimed countenance of the former and the thin pointed nose of the latter. They were evidently in deep discourse upon some absorbing topic; so much so, that they did not immediately notice the raising of the trap-door.

"May I come up?" asked the Hangman: "or is it anything very particular?"

"Oh! dear, dear—how you've startled me, Daniel!" exclaimed Jeremy, in a nervous, trembling voice. "But come up, my kind and excellent friend," he continued, assuming a bland and coaxing tone: "come up, my dear Daniel. You're the very person I wanted to see: and indeed I was just mentioning your name in the most affectionate terms to my new acquaintance here."

"Mr. Tibby Blades, I understand," said Coffin, as he went up the remaining steps of the ladder and closed the trap behind him. "They told me down stairs who it was you'd got with you. But I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him before: although I'd *heard* of him."

"Heard of me!" exclaimed the knife-grinder. "And yet I haven't made myself wery 'torious in the world yet awhile."

"Wasn't you at Richmond yesterday afternoon, or evening?" inquired the Hangman. "Come—you needn't hesitate about answering—old Jeremy here will tell you I'm all right."

"He's already told me so," observed the knife-grinder; "and therefore I needn't hesitate to say I *was* at Richmond for an hour or so ——"

"Enough, my tulip!" ejaculated Jack Ketch. "Come, tip us your daddle, and we'll be pals. I like the look of you, although ——"

"Although I *am* rather blackish and sooty—eh?" cried Tibby Blades, with a loud laugh. "Hah! hah! hah! hah!"

"He! he! he!" was the faint and tremulous chuckle, or rather cackle of old Jeremy. "You see, Mr. Blades, we're a merry set—a set of merry dogs, I can a sure you. We can laugh at anything and anybody—he! he! he! And here is my dear kind friend Daniel Coffin, who knows I love him as well as if he was my own son," continued the ancient fence, in a whining, canting, snivelling tone of wretched hypocrisy,—"and he'll tell you, Mr. Blades, that I'm a worthy old soul—a sort of father to a good many persons who couldn't do very well without me ——"

"Hold your precious humbugging tongue, you old fool," growled the Hangman, savagely. "I dare say our new friend Blades knows all about you; or else he wouldn't have come hunting you out in Bencull's crib."

"No—but he doesn't know all about me, though," shrieked the old man in a shrill voice: "and what I want is that he should know more about me than he does. Now, my dear kind Daniel, do tell Mr. Blades the truth: tell him that I never have anything to do with burglaries, highway robberies, or pocket-pickings; but that I am a moral man—a church-going man—a man who subscribes to charities and does a thousand little benevolent things in a quiet way."

"Aye—all your benevolence is snug enough, I'll be bound, Jeremy," exclaimed the Hangman: then turning towards the knife-grinder, he said, "You never in all your life saw such a snivelling, sneaking, blarneying, whining, coaxing old fool as this Jeremy Humpage. He's constantly endeavouring to persuade himself and others that he's not a regular fence who buys stolen goods, but a philanthropist who gives poor devils a good price for the scrapings of the gutters, the searchings of the sewers, and the rakings of the dunghills. If you even took him a chest of plate that cost a thousand guineas, he wouldn't seem to suspect for an instant that it was stolen: he'd ask you what nobleman or gentleman was in difficulties and had sent you to dispose of the property. Why, even I'm an honest man in old Jeremy's calculation," added Coffin, with a grim smile.

"To be sure, to be sure," said Humpage—for such was Jeremy's surname: "I never have anything to do with rogues and rascals. I don't want to fall out with the authorities and have the constables set in chase of me: I don't choose to know a single thing that's going on, unless it's all right and straightfor-

ward. I never look behind the scenes, Mr. Blades—never, never. The men and the women down stairs are all poor creatures who pick up little things in the gutters and on the dunghills, and bring them to me to buy!"

"Yes—such pretty things as watches, snuff-boxes, rings, and gold chains," observed the Hangman, with a sarcastic leer. "They're plentiful enough in London: it isn't however in the gutters, on the dunghills, and in the sewers they're found—but in the pockets, round the necks, and on the fingers of gentlemen and ladies."

"Well, well—it may be," said old Jeremy, in a querulous voice and with nervous manner. "But recollect this, my dear friend Mr. Blades—for good friends we shall no doubt become—recollect, I say, that I am no associate of bad characters—I have nothing to do with them. I am a man of reputation—buying and selling in a legitimate manner; and if I come down occasionally to my kind friend, Mr. Bencull's house——"

"Once a week at least, old fellow," ejaculated the Hangman.

"You see how jocular he is, Mr. Blades," said Humpage; "so full of life and spirits! Well, I look upon him as a son——"

"You crafty, hypocritical, lying old vagabond," interrupted Daniel Coffin,—"you know you hate me as the devil does holy water. But you're obliged to keep friends with me—and so am I with you, unfortunately. I wish, however, you would leave off this canting, droning, wheedling style of your's, and speak out like a man. But that you'll never do. You and I have known each other a many years now—and you've always been the same."

"So have you, my dear Daniel," returned Humpage, with an air of bland ingenuousness;—"always the same jovial, waggish, good-natured fellow."

"Good-natured indeed!" growled the Hangman, looking about as well pleased as an angry bull-dog. "Precious good-natured, no doubt, not to have knocked you on the head long ago."

"That would never do, my dear kind friend," said Humpage, with another cackling laugh, as if he thought the Hangman was only joking. "If anything happened to me, Daniel, what would you do when you found a handsome gold watch in the street, or a splendid snuff-box lying in some deserted corner? No one would use you so well as I do. And when, too, some nobleman or gentleman trusted you with a plate-chest to dispose of—or a lady gave you her diamonds to sell for her——"

"Hark at the old fool!" ejaculated Jack Ketch, in deep disgust. "He knows as well as possible that he never bought a watch or a snuff-box of me in all his life that wasn't stolen—and that he never melted down a single piece of plate that wasn't the produce of a burglary."

"Was there ever a man so fond of a joke as my dear friend Dan Coffin?" cried old Jeremy, chuckling again. "But I was going to tell you, Mr. Blades, when he interrupted me just now," continued the fence, addressing himself to the knife-grinder,—"that if I come occasionally to my old friend Bencull's very respectable and well-conducted lodging-house, it is only to save such poor creatures as those down stairs the trouble of coming to me at my own abode in Whitechapel. I look upon them all as my own children, and love them as dearly——"

"Curse this nonsense!" ejaculated the Hangman, stamping his foot upon the floor with impatience. "You're enough to drive one mad with your hypocritical, carneying trash."

"Don't be angry, my excellent friend—don't be angry," said Humpage. "I only wanted our new friend Mr. Blades, to know what sort of a person I am——"

"Well—and now he'll take your word for it," interrupted Jack Ketch. "Come—we've had enough of blarney and gammon; and therefore let's see if we can't talk rationally for a few minutes. In the first place, am I one too many here? Because, if so, I'll step down stairs again——"

"Not a bit of it—not a bit of it," cried old Jeremy Humpage.

"Well, then—I'll stop," continued the Hangman. "And now tell me, you ancient hypocrite, what you wanted to see me for, and why you was mentioning my name in such friendly terms just at the very moment that I came up?"

"The fact is," returned Jeremy, now lowering his voice to a whisper, "our new friend here, Mr. Tibby Blades—and a very pretty name it is, too—happened to hear my name mentioned at Miss Scratchem's highly respectable lodging-house in Whitechapel——"

"Polly Scratchem's flash crib—eh?" exclaimed the Hangman. "Well—go on. I suppose our friend Blades," he added, glancing towards the knife-grinder, "heard that you was a precious old fence——"

"A fair-dealing purchaser of miscellaneous goods, you mean," said Jeremy. "And so, as our new friend Blades expects to have a few things to dispose of in the course of next week, and as he wants to leave town the first thing to-morrow morning, he thought he had better see me without delay. Is it not so, my dear Mr. Blades?"

"That's right enough," answered the knife-grinder. "And when I'd explained myself to you, you said that if I wanted any assistance in *moving* the few things I spoke of, you could recommend me to Mr. Daniel Coffin as a individual you'd knowed and esteemed for many years."

"Now I understand," exclaimed the Hangman: then, taking Tibby Blades by the button-hole and looking him significantly in the face, he said, "Is there really anything to be done anywhere?—and do you want a pal in the matter?"

"Don't discuss your schemes in my presence!" cried old Jeremy. "I've introduced you to each other—and that's enough. Go and talk elsewhere, like dear good creatures as you are."

"Well, well—you needn't mind us—we shan't be many minutes," observed the Hangman. "And I want to say something to you presently, old Jeremy—something that will make your precious toothless mouth water, I know."

"Always joking—always joking!" chuckled Humpage: but as the Hangman drew the knife-grinder aside into a corner, a scowl of diabolical malignity passed over the countenance of the ancient fence.

"Now, my fine fellow," whispered the Hangman to Tibby Blades, "I'm a person of few words—and I hate such wretched drivelling and loathsome nonsense as that old impostor has been indulging

in. Of course you see through him as well as I do. But enough of that. I told you just now that I like your looks: what I ought to have said was that I like what I've heard of you—because as for your looks, you'll excuse me for saying that they're scarcely distinguishable through the grime and soot."

"And what have you heard of me?" inquired Tibby Blades.

"That you're one of the right sort," was the immediate answer. "So, in a few words, if you've anything in hand where you want the aid of a staunch comrade, I'm your man."

"The truth is," said the knife-grinder, "I know of a job that can be done nice and safe—down in the country somewhere——"

"Is it a crack?" demanded the Hangman, thus figuratively inquiring whether the affair alluded to was an intended burglary.

"No—a post-chaise robbery," rejoined the knife-grinder. "The genelman to be robbed is now in town: his butler and me are on a tolerable good understanding together—and that's how I've got my information. Last evening, as I was leaving Richmond, I met this here butler who was a-pleasuring down there for the day; and he told me as how his master will leave London one day next week in a post-chaise, and with a trunk full of new plate and all kinds of jewellery and trinkets for his family."

"Ah! by the gibbet and halter! this will be good pickings," said the Hangman. "So I suppose that on receiving this information from your friend the butler, you returned to London——"

"Yes—although I'm wanted by the runners," answered the knife-grinder. "Having heard old Jeremy Humpage's name mentioned at Polly Scratchem's, I thought of making it all right with him beforehand, to receive the property and toss it into his melting-pot the instant I get it up to London——"

"*Moving* the goods, as he calls it," observed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "Well—go on."

"I've nothing more to say—only that Polly Scratchem told me where Humpage lived in Whitechapel, and on going to his house I found he wasn't at home; so I went back to Polly, and then she recollected where it was his night to be—and knowing she could trust me, although I'm somewhat of a stranger to the flash coves in London, she whispered that I should find him at the Folly Bridges."*

"Well—and he has agreed to receive the property, supposing the affair comes off?" said the Hangman, inquiringly.

"In his humbugging fashion," answered the knife-grinder, "he has told me that if so be any nobleman or genelman sends me to his house with certain goods to dispose of, he won't make no bones of buying 'em off-hand. So that point 's as good as settled. To-morrow I'm off into the country—'cos why, London is raither too hot to hold me: but on Monday I shall come up again to meet my friend the butler—and then he'll let me know the exact day and hour when his master intends to start for home."

"You'll want some one to help you, Tibby," observed the Hangman.

"To be sure—and you shall go snacks with me in the business," was the immediate answer. "I'll see you again next Monday, either here or wherever you like."

"At my place in Fleet Lane," said Jack Ketch. "Of course old Jeremy has told you who I am—Dan'el Coffin—public executioner—cheap barber—and all that sort of thing."

"I twig, my fine feller," returned Tibby Blades.

"Then we've nothing more to say at present," observed the Hangman. "You can step down stairs and blow a cloud, while I just transact a little private business with old Jeremy Humpage—and then I'll join you. I suppose you ain't in a hurry to be off for an hour or so?"

"Not a bit of it," responded the knife-grinder. "On the contrary, I should like to have a little chat with you, so as to make us better acquainted—partickler as we're going to do business together."

"Well, I'll join you and the others down below in a few minutes," said the Hangman.

Tibby Blades accordingly returned to the lower room, while Daniel Coffin remained behind to discourse with old Jeremy.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE COMPANY AT THE DARK CRIB.

THE knife-grinder, on resuming his seat at the table amongst the rogues and vile women assembled there, lighted his pipe—ordered more brandy—and proceeded to indulge in a more scrutinizing survey of the company than he had previously been enabled to take.

There was one hideous-looking man, with his nose smashed flat to his face, so that he resembled a being with a death's head. He had a black eye and a handkerchief tied over his forehead—which did not improve his appearance. He was a Swag Chovey Bloak, or marine-store dealer,—a fence on a small scale, and was accustomed to sell to old Jeremy any articles of value which he purchased from the thieves or pickpockets in immediate connexion with himself.

There were two fellows, each with a black patch over one eye, although the optics thus concealed were perfect and free from injury as those which were left uncovered. But one pretended to be an old soldier, declaring that he had lost an eye in the wars: and he was called Bob the Durrynacker, *alias* the Beggar. The other was a Mushroom Faker, or fellow who went about with umbrellas to mend: and the black patch was now a part of some new disguise which he had recently assumed.

There was a very pale-faced man, dressed in seedy black, and having an appearance of shabby respectability. He looked like a decayed tradesman—one who had seen better days; and by dint of practice, he had subdued and plasticised his countenance into an expression of profoundly sanctimonious melancholy. He was a regular Highflyer of Fakements, or Begging-letter Impostor: and he kept his cheeks pale, thin, and emaciated by drinking a bottle of Mr. Bencull's vitriolised gin every night of his life.

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* In the days of which we are writing—namely, thirty-six years ago—Jacob's Island was generally known as "The Folly Bridges."

Another of the delectable company present was a jovial good-humoured looking man, with the crown of his white hat hanging half off. He was a Buttoner, or thimble-rig professional, and was remarkably ready with all that coarse wit and slang humour which fellows of his class deal in so glibly for the purpose of attracting dupes at fairs and races, and keeping them amused when they are once so attracted.

The women were young—coarse in appearance, and disgusting alike in conduct and speech. Their persons were very much exposed, and they encouraged the freedoms which their male companions took with them. They belonged to the lowest class of unfortunate women who infest the vilest neighbourhoods of the metropolis.

As a matter of course, all these persons were thieves, with the exception of the marine-store dealer, who was only the recipient of stolen goods and a sort of agent for old Jeremy Humpage. The "old soldier" was one of the sturdiest and most obtrusive beggars in the metropolis; and while following a gentleman or lady with his importunities, he was remarkably dexterous in easing the former of a snuff-box or handkerchief, and the latter of a reticule—or either of them of a purse. The umbrella-mender was wont to knock at front-doors and induce the servants to go and inquire "if anything was wanting to be done in his little way"—and while left alone for a moment, he would walk off with a hat, cloak, or umbrella from the hall. Or else he would go down area-steps, or round to back doors, and frequently find opportunities of decamping with the plate that might be left about on kitchen-tables or dressers. The same system was practised by the begging-letter impostor, who was even enabled at times to introduce himself into the parlours of charitable people and secrete a watch, a mantel-ornament, or other article of value about his person.

The thimble-rigger was accustomed to "work with mobs," or accomplices, who hustled and robbed the unfortunate dupes attracted to the itinerant gambling table; and it generally fell to his lot to dispose of the "frisked swag," or booty. Hence his presence at the dark crib on the nights when old Jeremy was wont to visit it.

The women not only pursued their loathsome trade in the usual manner, but also enticed drunken and unwary persons to the dark crib or other infamous houses at Folly's Bridges; and there the victims were plundered of all they had about them worth taking. Sometimes they were cruelly maltreated:—and from time to time that dreadful neighbourhood became the scene of deeds of still blacker dye and more appalling magnitude.

The knife-grinder was seated on a three-legged stool; and with his soot-begrimed countenance, his ragged hair, his dirty garments, and the short pipe in his mouth, he looked a character perfectly fitted to be in such a place and in such company. Mr. Bencull's bull-dog—a savage brute, answering to the name of Throtler—sate under the table;—and every time a foot accidentally kicked against him, or trod on his tail, he sent forth a ferocious growl that rumbled through the crazy building.

But let us now listen to some of the discourse which took place in that room where the guests were assembled.

"I say, Bob," exclaimed the begging-letter impostor, addressing himself to the Durrynacker, "what's become of Teddy Limber again?"

"Teddy Limber was like to get into trouble t'other day, and so he's speeled from his old crib," was the reply. "I'll tell you how it was. He'd tied up prigging and taken to faking the sinkers. Larry Sampson found him out, and went to his crib up in the Holy Land. Larry enters the place with a couple of runners, and insists on making a search. But for a long time it was no go; and Teddy Limber stood by laughing. At length Larry moves the bedstead and examines the floor. Then Teddy's face begins to darken; and Larry sees he's on the right scent. So he pokes about; and in the corner, just under where one of the legs of the bedstead had stood, he takes up a bit of the flooring, about a couple of inches square—just big enough to put the hand in. Then he feels a string, and he draws up a worsted stocking containing a lot of gammy cases, half-cases, cooters, pegs, and snids. So when Teddy sees that he's twigged, he rushes to the door—gives a right-hander to one of Larry's men, and a left-hander to t'other—knocks 'em both down—rushes out—and bolts the door on 'em. Larry was betwixt the bedstead and the wall at the time, and couldn't get out quick enough to help his chaps or seize hold of Teddy. So Teddy gets clear off as cocum as you please."*

"And what's become of Teddy now?" inquired one of the women, who laughed more heartily than their male companions at this anecdote.

"Not knowing, can't say," was the Durrynacker's response. "But I was going to tell you how Larry Sampson went on to find that Teddy had a false mantel-piece in his crib; and when the mantel was taken away, a lot of Teddy's traps was discovered in a great recess in the wall—such as the dies, the metal, the melting-pots, and other things used in faking the sinkers. And in the stocking that contained the sinkers, was a bit of paper with Teddy's own written instructions how to make the bright coin look dull and silvery-like: so it's quite clear that Teddy had an order for the sinkers and was going to deliver them just about the time Larry Sampson pounced down upon him."

"And what did the receipt say?" asked the woman who had before spoken.

"Why, the process seems quite a new 'un: but I saw it tried yesterday by Watty Sparkes, and it answers capital. You must put the coin on a hot iron; and when the colour begins to change, clap it in a bag of bran and shake it well: then pass it through a bit of cheese, and wipe it clean with a coarse towel. But it musn't be rubbed much."

"Well, that's simple enow," observed the knife-grinder, refilling his pipe. "And so Watty Sparkes is in that line, eh? I thought he was out in the country crocusing along with Patty Finks who does the dookin." †

"So he was," answered the Durrynacker: "but he's come back, along with Patty—and now they're in business as sinker-fakers somewhere over in Shadwell. But I say, old Swag Chovey Bloak,"

* Speeled—cut and run. Tied up prigging—given up thieving. Faking the sinkers—making base money. Holy Land—St. Giles's. Gammy—spurious. Cases—crowns. Half-cases—half-crowns. Cooters—sovereigns. Pegs—shillings. Snids—sixpences. Cocum—clever.

† Crocusing—travelling about the country selling soap and quack-medicines. Dooking—fortune-telling.

exclaimed Bob the Beggar, turning towards the marine-store dealer, "how the devil come you with that black eye and with your head tied up in that fashion?"

"Why, in consequence of that very Teddy Limber you've been talking about," was the gruff and sulky answer: "so you see I can give another chapter in his history if I like."

"Well, and won't you like?" asked one of the women, coaxingly.

"Oh! if it's to please you, I will," returned the marine-store dealer, somewhat mollified by this bland appeal. "You must know, then, that when Teddy escaped from his crib up in the Holy Land, as the Durrynacker has told you, he come right away to my house in St. George's Fields. I took him in, and put him up safe in the front room first floor, amongst all the rags, bones, bottles, and old iron. Well, it seems that Larry Sampson traced him out, and came with his people to take him. It was late at night—and they knocked at the street-door. I was sitting smoking a pipe and drinking a drop of blue ruin with Teddy, when we heard the knock. We suspected what it was;—and so I opened the window and asked who was there and what they wanted. Larry said he must come in. I told him no one he could possibly want was there; but he said that was no business of mine. '*Keep him talking a minute,*' says Teddy, in a whisper to me; '*and I'll get out on the leads.*' For of course Teddy knew that Sampson had posted some of his men at the back of the house; or else he would not have been such a fool as to come and raise an alarm at the front door. But all in a moment Larry Sampson begins to push away at the front door to force it open; and while I was leaning out of the window blackguarding him for breaking into an Englishman's house, which is his castle, lo and behold, I lost my balance and pitched out into the street."

At this stage of the narrative, the Buttoner, or thimble-rig professional, gave vent to an ejaculation of surprise, accompanied by an oath: but when the looks of all present were turned upon him as if seeking an explanation, he hastily bade the marine-store dealer proceed, observing that he would explain afterwards.

"Well," continued the Swag Chovey Bloak, "I must do Larry Sampson the justice to say, much as I hate him as a cursed thief-taker, that he and his men instantly left off pushing at the door and hastened to pick me up; and this gave Teddy Limber time to get safe away over the roofs of the houses. The fall deuced near killed me: but it hasn't quite, however," added the man with a ghastly smile.

"So your misfortune was Teddy's salvation," observed the knife-grinder, who appeared to enjoy the anecdote amazingly.

"Well, this is the rummest lark I ever knew in all my life," exclaimed the Buttoner: "and that's what made me sing out as I did just now, because I've heard the story before about the pitching out of the winder. But is Teddy Limber a tall, thin, shambling feller, with precious long arms and legs?"

"Just so," returned the Durrynacker. "He reminds one of a giblet pie—all wings and legs."

"Then by jingo it *is* the same!" cried the Buttoner. "The rascal—I'll pay him out!"

"What has he done?" asked several voices.

"He stunned me of my regulars," replied the indignant thimble-rigger: "and I'll tell you how it was. I was down at Chatham on Saturday, and there was a fair there. Well, I was working the tiddlywink with a mob, when a feller comes up and gets into conversation. I saw he was a leary chap, and thought he'd suit as a pal. So we went to a public-house, had some drink, and talked matters over. He told me how he'd bolted from London; and how a friend of his'n had pitched out of the winder while blarneying with the runners. So I was took with him; and he agreed to work with my mob. We went back into the fair and set up the table. '*Now,*' says I, as the yokels and flats gathered round, '*here's von, two, and three; the fairest game that ever you see. The royal game of tiddlywink, paytronised by their Majesties, his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chief Justice, and all the nobility and gentry. Here you are: now's your time and now's your opportunity. Them as doesn't bet can't win; and them as does bet is sure to lose. Von, two, three—the fashionable game of tiddlywink, now in vogue at all the first houses in the land!*'—Well, I was a-going on at this rate, when a regular yokel chucks down a guinea, swearing he'd tell under which thimble the little pea was. '*Von, two, three,*' says I; '*them as uses their eyes, must see. Four, five, six: here's the little pea capering about like bricks. Seven, eight, nine: the game shall be mine. Now, sir, you can't tell under which thimble is the little pea?*—'*This von,*' says the yokel, pinting to a thimble.—'*No it isn't,*' says I: '*the little pea, here he be.*' And I lifted up another thimble. Then bang went the flat's hat over his eyes—my mobs-men hustled him—and away I scampered with the tiddlywink-table, while Teddy Limber (although I didn't know his name then) frisked the yokel of his yack and skin. All was confusion in the crowd: but we every one of the party managed to get safe off. Well, me and my pals met presently at the public-house where we'd agreed to meet: but Teddy Limber never come near the place at all. We waited for him a long time; and then one of us went out to see if he'd been lumbered. But no such thing. He had cut and run—and we never heard or saw any more of him."*

"Shameful!" ejaculated several voices.

"To bounce you out of your regulars!" cried the women, even more indignant than the men.

At this moment the trap-door opened—and Daniel Coffin the Hangman descended the ladder from the room above. Almost at the same time Mr. Bencull, who had been engaged in another part of his little establishment, rejoined the company: but it was evident from his appearance that he had been indulging in copious libations. His hat was cocked over his right ear—and he carried a bottle in his hand: but, seating himself next to the Swag Chovey Bloak, he assumed that air of drunken mysteriousness and wisdom which people in their cups so often put on in order to seem sober.

"We'll drink the health of our new friend what's-

* Stunned me of my regulars—cheated me of my share of the booty. Working the tiddlywink—doing the thimble-rig. With a mob—with several confederates. Leary—sharp, wide-awake. Yokels—countrymen. Frisked—robbed. Yack and skin—watch and purse. Lumbered—taken into custody.

his-name," hiccoughed forth Mr. Bencull, as he grasped the bottle in one hand and a little pewter measure in the other.

"With all my heart," said the Hangman, filling a glass and holding it up. "May he never want a fooney to flash in a boozing-ken; nor ever pad the hoof or flare in tats for want of the long-tailed finnips to buy nibsome toggery."*

This toast was drunk with uproarious applause, in the excitement of which Mr. Bencull tumbled from his seat and rolled on the floor. This incident added to the prevailing mirth; and when it had somewhat subsided and the landlord had picked himself up again, Tibby Blades acknowledged the honour which had been done him in a "neat speech" that showed his erudition with regard to the flash language.

The Hangman now stated that Jeremy Humpage was ready up-stairs to receive those who had any bargains in hand with him; and all present save Daniel Coffin himself, the knife-grinder, and Bencull, ascended the ladder to receive the amounts which the old fence was inclined to offer for the various articles submitted to his appraisement. A great deal of haggling, abuse, recrimination, and quarrelling ensued: but the miserable wretches, who were all at the mercy of the ancient villain, were ultimately compelled to accept his terms;—and having received about one-tenth part of the value of the stolen goods, they retraced their steps down the ladder into the lower room.

Old Jeremy and the Swag Chovey Bloak soon afterwards quitted the house together; and those who remained behind called for more liquor, vowing that they would enjoy themselves.

Presently a knock was heard at the street-door of the house: and Bencull staggered along the passage with a light in his hand to answer the summons. Some whispering took place—a female voice was heard in conversation with Bencull—and then the street-door was closed and the door of the front room opened, evidently to admit new-comers.

"Who the deuce can they be?" said the Hangman.

But scarcely had he made this remark, when Bencull returned to the room, looking more mysteriously knowing in his inebriation than ever.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE YOUNG LADY.

"WELL, what is it?" demanded Jack Ketch and the women, all as it were in one breath.

"Such a pretty gal—such a sweet little creatur'!" said Bencull, in a low tone and with sapient look. "Quite a innocent, too!"

"Who the devil are you talking about?" asked the Hangman, impatiently—for his curiosity was excited.

"Why, Nell Gibson has picked up a young lady who's lost her way and seems in great distress," returned Bencull; — "not distress in money-matters, I don't mean—'cos why, she's well dressed and has got a well filled purse in her pocket. But she's in what's called distress of mind. I think she must have run away from her parents, or somethink of the sort. At all events, Nell Gibson has got her in tow, and has evidently crammed her well with all kinds of gammon. But if one of you gals will go into the other room and pretend to be Nell's sister, you can stay there a little while with the young lady, and let Nell come to us for a few minutes just to tell us all about it."

"I'll go," exclaimed one of the women, starting from her seat: then, snatching up a rag of a shawl from a corner and throwing it over her shoulders, she covered her hitherto much-exposed bosom, saying, "I musn't frighten the young lady any how. On the contrary, I'll look as modest and demure as if I was at a christening. But what am I to tell her?"

"Why, that this is a respectable house, though a humble one—and that it's kept by honest though poor people," answered Bencull, his speech being interrupted by sundry drunken hiccoughs. "You must pass off as Nell's sister, and make believe that you live here with your parents. Do anythink so as you don't frighten the gal: and mind if she does get alarmed, that she don't slip out of the house. The front door is chained and bolted, but not locked."

"I'll play my part well, you may rest assured," said the young woman: and assuming as quiet a demeanour as she could possibly put on, she quitted the room.

In a few minutes Nell Gibson made her appearance. She was a fine, tall, well-grown girl, about nineteen years of age; and though steeped to the lips in profligacy, she nevertheless had sufficient outward appearance of respectability to deceive an unwary person, especially an inexperienced young creature of her own sex, relative to her true character. She was neatly dressed—and there was little of that brazen-faced impudence and loathsome wantonness in her looks which characterised the other females whom we have already described at the dark crib. Indeed, she was altogether one of the most artful, designing, and dangerous women of her class; and, as if no phase in the infamy of her pursuits should be wanting, she not only enticed unsuspecting men to the abominable houses which she frequented, but also young and artless girls whom she delighted to train in the paths which lead to destruction.

Such was the female who now received a hearty welcome from the Hangman and the other persons present with whom she was acquainted. Indeed, she knew them all full well, with the exception of Tibby Blades the knife-grinder—although he assured her that she was no stranger to him, at least personally, inasmuch as he had seen her before at some flash house.

Her tale relative to the adventure which now engrossed all interest, was soon told. It appeared that as she was returning to her own dwelling, through the maze of vile streets which exist in all the neighbourhood of Jacob's Island, or Folly Bridges, she saw a young lady, by the light of a lamp, seated on a door-step, apparently overcome with exhaustion and grief. By her appearance Nell Gibson judged her to be really what she seemed; and accosting her in a soothing manner, she drew her into conversation. The young lady declared that she had been walking for some time

* May he never want a guinea to sport in a public-house; nor ever go without shoes or appear in rags for want of large Bank-notes to buy good clothes.

—that she had lost her way—but that if any one would conduct her to a respectable lodging for the rest of the night, she was in a condition to pay liberally for the kindness shown and the accommodation furnished. As a proof of this portion of her statement, and being inspired with confidence in Nell Gibson, the young lady exhibited her purse, which was evidently well filled. The artlessness of the tale and the sight of the purse were sufficient to induce the profligate woman to take the young lady under her immediate "protection:" and as Bencull's dark crib was the nearest of the kind, she at once conducted her intended victim thither. Overcome by fatigue of body and distress of mind, the young lady was too glad to welcome any place in the shape of a lodging and anything in the guise of sympathy, to pay very particular attention either to the locality to which she was conducted, or to the person who was conducting her thither: she therefore readily believed that her new friend was really a respectable young woman though in humble circumstances, and that the house was an honest one although in a poor neighbourhood.

The front room, into which the young lady had been shown, was a bed-chamber, although upon the ground-floor; and it was fitted up in a manner infinitely superior to the other parts of the house. It was indeed the room to which persons were assigned when enticed to the crib by any of the loose females connected with the gang: and therefore, for obvious reasons, it was tolerably well furnished. Thus every circumstance combined to lull the young lady into a false security and alleviate any suspicions that the aspect of the neighbourhood might otherwise chance to arouse in her mind. We should however observe that the moon had disappeared some time before she encountered Nell Gibson; and consequently, as she threaded Mill Street in her way to the dark crib, the full horror of Jacob's Island was veiled from her view.

Having told her tale to Bencull and his guests in the little back room, Nell Gibson returned to the chamber occupied by the young lady. The other female whom the landlord sent thither, had played her part sufficiently well, so that the young lady still believed she was in respectable quarters. This female now retired upon the re-appearance of Nell, who inquired if her guest would take any refreshment. But the young lady was so exhausted that she only thought of lying down to rest; and she was even too much fatigued to put off her apparel. She would do no more than lay aside her bonnet and shawl—not because she entertained any misgivings, but in reality because she was drooping and sinking with utter prostration. It did not however escape Nell's notice that the confiding young creature was possessed of a handsome watch and chain, and several other articles of jewellery, in addition to her purse; and she already chuckled inwardly at the rich prize that had fallen into her hands.

In a few moments the young lady threw herself upon the bed; and Nell Gibson, wishing her a sound repose, quitted the chamber—leaving however the candle behind her, for fear of exciting any premature suspicion.

On returning to the back room, she communicated to the persons there assembled the pleasing fact of the valuable jewellery possessed by the young lady; and a council of war was now held, in a subdued tone, relative to the most fitting course that was to be adopted towards the guest.

"Let Nell speak first," said the Hangman, "and give her opinion—as she has had the trouble and shown the tact in getting the girl here."

"I scarce know what to advise," observed the young woman, after a few minutes' consideration. "I think, now that I've seen more of her, that she's too innocent to break in all on a sudden: and if we attempt to keep her here by force, she'll alarm the whole neighbourhood with her cries and screams. At the same time, I'm resolved that we will have the purse and the jewels, happen what will. It would be downright madness to let them slip through our fingers. I can say no more."

"But you have your secret thoughts, though, Nell," observed the woman who had been into the young lady's chamber: "and I can read 'em," she added with dark and ominous significancy.

"And so can I," observed the Buttoner. "I know what I'd do in such a case."

"What?" demanded the Hangman, looking at him with the fixity of a diabolical expression of countenance.

"Why—*this*," responded the thimble-rigger, drawing his hand across his throat. "Or else *this*," he added, making a gesture with his arm as if he were knocking a person on the head with a bludgeon.

The knife-grinder started—nay, almost bounded—on his chair; and all eyes were instantaneously turned inquiringly, and even suspiciously, upon him.

"That's precisely what I'd do also," he observed in a deliberate manner and meeting the looks of his companions with a steady gaze: and at the same time he settled himself in his chair, so that the suddenness of his start seemed only to have been one of those abrupt movements which often accompany a change from one posture to another.

"What would you do, d'ye say?" demanded the Hangman, as if determined to make him express in words the thoughts so darkly hinted at.

"Why, sooner than lose the swag I should be for making away with her, to be sure," answered Tibby, in a resolute voice: "and what's more, if you're afraid to do it——"

"You will?" said the Hangman, in a hasty tone of inquiry.

"Yes—I will," returned the knife-grinder.

"Then tip us your hand, old fellow," said Coffin. "I did you a moment's injustice—I thought you started strangely——"

"Oh! not I," observed Tibby Blades, carelessly: "unless it was that I felt rayther disgusted to think you should all go beating about the bush to get at an idea which all along was uppermost in everybody's thoughts."

"It was in mine," said Nell Gibson, resolutely.

"You knew it was the only plan—didn't you?" demanded the Buttoner.

"To be sure I did," was the girl's answer. "The young lady is innocent and unsuspecting—and I couldn't break her in under a week, perhaps a month. In the mean time, who is to keep watch upon her, night and day, to see she doesn't escape?—and wouldn't her screams and cries soon get talked about all over the neighbourhood? On the other hand, if we rob her and let her go quietly away in the morning, she will of course lodge an

information against us and we shall all be laid up in lavender and lagged."*

"All that's the very same notion that I've got in the matter," said the Mushroom Faker.

"There's no disputing the argument," observed Bob the Durrynacker.

"But if we are all in for the risk as accomplices," said the Highflyer of Fakements, "we must also go shares on equal terms."

"To be sure—ekal sheers?" cried the Buttoner.

"Hush!" whispered Nell Gibson, in a tone of authority. "There's two persons that must have more than the rest: one's myself, for bringing the young lady here—and the other's the individual, whoever he may be, that will do the job."

"All fair and right enough," observed the Hangman.

"So I say!" exclaimed Bencull: then, rising from his seat and staggering towards the door, he said with a hiccough, "I'll do the job, blow me!"

"No, no," cried the Hangman, clutching him by the arm and dragging him back to his seat: "you're not in a fit state—you'll only make a mess of it."

"I'm your man!" said Tibby Blades, the knife-grinder, starting up. "Lend us your club, Dan'el—and in a very few minutes the young lady shall wake in another place. Only keep that cussed dog quiet—'cos animals of that sort is apt to howl and moan when there's death in a house."

"We'll take care of him," observed the Hangman, as he gave his short knotted stick to the knife-grinder. "Here—toss off another dram of bingo—and then get to work. There's no use delaying in these kinds of things."

"Not a bit of use," said the women, assentingly: but, with the exception of Nell Gibson whose heart

* Laid up in lavender and lagged—thrown into prison and transported.

was steeled against all pity and all remorse, they spoke in hushed voices and with a cold shuddering.

"Now I'm ready," observed the knife-grinder, having drained the glass which Jack Ketch presented to him: and, grasping the club, he fixed his hat with an air of resolution upon his head, and was preparing to leave the room when a sudden thought struck him. "You must lend me the light," he said, taking up the only one that was left burning on the table.

"No—don't leave us in the dark," cried one of the women, a ghastly pallor instantaneously superseding the flush of drinking.

"Coward—fool!" hissed from the lips of Nell Gibson, as her eyes glared like those of a tiger-cat upon the young woman: then turning towards the knife-grinder, she said, "There's no necessity to take this candle, because I left one burning in the lady's room."

"Very good," observed Tibby Blades. "Now don't move or make a noise till I come back. I shan't be many minutes absent," he added with a look of ominous significancy.

He then quitted the room, closing the door behind him.

Gently he crept along the short passage: but though he walked as if treading upon ice too thin to bear him, the crazy boards creaked beneath his feet. He groped for the latch of the door opening into the front chamber: he found it—raised it cautiously—and entered the room. The candle was still burning upon a little round table in the middle—and the young lady was lying stretched in profound slumber upon the bed.

But the knife-grinder did not waste a moment in contemplating her. He closed the door—and put a chair slanting-wise against it so as to secure it from being opened unless by great force: for there was no lock or fastening of any kind save the mere latch. He then cautiously raised the window and examined the shutter. A single bolt held it; and it opened like a door on the outside of the casement.

Leaving the shutter still closed, but the window open, Tibby Blades approached the bed and shook the young lady by the shoulder. She opened her eyes; and starting up, was about to give vent to a scream. But the knife-grinder instantaneously said, "For God's sake, be still!" in so hurried yet deep and impressive a manner, that the sound died upon her lips—and her terror showed itself in a wild gaze.

"Young lady, I am your friend—don't mind my appearance—for I'm only a poor tinker," were the hasty words which he now whispered in her ears. "You are in a dreadful place—and you must get up and escape without a moment's delay."

The young lady sate up on the bed and still gazed wildly upon the knife-grinder, as if a terrible consternation were upon her.

"Here—take your jewels—put on your things—and be off—for God's sake be off!" said the man, in so earnest and imploring a tone that the young creature was instantaneously awakened as it were to a sense of some frightful peril and to the necessity of energetic action.

Trembling, however, from head to foot, and with chattering teeth, she huddled on her clothes and thrust her purse and jewels into her pocket. The knife-grinder opened the shutter as gently as he could, and helped her out into the street. But at that instant the rush of footsteps in the passage fell on his ears—and at the moment he was preparing to follow her through the window, the chamber-door was broken in. He sprang after her into the street: but he stumbled—fell heavily with his head against a stone—and was stunned. In another instant the Hangman, who bounded after him through the window, was kneeling upon him, keeping him down—while Nell Gibson and some others of the gang opened the front-door and rushed in pursuit of the young lady.

Away she sped along the street, terror giving wings to her feet, but paralysing her tongue. She heard the pursuers—and yet she could not cry out for assistance. Fortunately for her, a number of men belonging to one of the wharves on Bermondsey Walk were just going to their work at an hour unusually early, on account of some lighter that was to be loaded for the next tide;—and the young lady, perceiving by the glimmering of dawn which was now breaking, that they were honest-looking fellows, at once appealed to them for protection.

Nell Gibson and her accomplices, observing the turn which the adventure had thus taken, hurried back to the dark crib, into which the Hangman and Bencull had in the meantime borne the still senseless knife-grinder. The shutter was speedily closed again—the street-door secured—and thus, in a few minutes, the dreadful house once more presented a tranquil though gloomy and sombre exterior to the view.

In a hurried and incoherent manner, the young lady told the wharfingers how she had been enticed to some bad place close by—how she had been warned of danger and assisted to escape by some friendly-disposed person—and how this person in endeavouring to follow her, had fallen and been secured by the inmates of the dwelling. The working-men, compassionating the afflicted young creature, offered to escort her to a safer neighbourhood: but they were too much accustomed to hear of broils and disturbances in Jacob's Island to think it worth their while to mix themselves up any farther in the matter. Two of them accordingly set off to conduct her away from that vicinage—and the others proceeded to their work.

But in the meantime what had happened inside the dark crib?

The knife-grinder, still stunned and senseless from the effects of his fall, had been borne into the dwelling and carried to that back room where the night's orgie had taken place. The villains laid him upon the floor, and in hurried manner deliberated upon the course that they should pursue. That he was either a traitor or a coward they felt convinced; and in either case there was every reason to apprehend that he would betray them. He had heard enough of their proceedings and their plans, even setting aside their intention to murder the young lady, to consign them all to prison and send them out as transports from the country;—and so desperate a set of miscreants were not likely to hesitate long how to dispose of so dangerous an individual. They therefore resolved to make away with him; and as he was already in a state of insensibility, this course could be carried out with but little violence and no noise.

All present being agreed upon the point, the

made no reply, for fear of aggravating him; and he was somewhat softened by this apparent submissiveness on their part.

"Well, I can't say that I've much to complain of against you," he observed: "only I can't bear sharp answers. What are you looking at, Jack?"

"This picture of Dick Turpin hanging," was the response. "I think Turpin was a very fine fellow—and I'm never tired of looking at the picture. What a shame it was to send such a chap to the gibbet. But did he really wear a laced coat like that?"

"To be sure he did," answered the Hangman. "He was a very spicy cove in his togs, and always looked as if he belonged to swell street. It's more than seventy years ago since he was scragged. My father saw him turned off: it was at Tyburn. As he went up the ladder his right leg seemed to tremble for a moment: but he stamped it down hard—like that," said Coffin, suiting the action to the word and making the whole crazy building shake from bottom to top with the force of his foot. "When he'd stamped in that manner, Turpin looked round with a dauntless air upon the multitude, and received three cheers. Ah! that must have been a proud moment for him," added Jack Ketch, shaking his head slowly and with a look of envy.

But at this moment two or three customers entered the shop; and the Hangman's anecdotes, which by the bye he delighted to tell, were cut suddenly short, at least for the time being. He and his assistants began to lather and shave away; and a miscellaneous conversation was kept up the whole time. A succession of customers continued to arrive in sufficient numbers to keep Coffin, Dick, and the Foundling fully employed for the next hour; and during that period all kinds of things were discussed. The latest broils in the neighbourhood—the approaching sessions at the Old Bailey—the conduct of the last men who had been hung—the exploits of skilful and well known thieves—the quality of the liquor at the various public-houses in the neighbourhood—the recent prize-fights—the severity of the tax-gatherers—the latest rows in the Fleet prison—some attempted escapes from Newgate—the comparative merits of notorious highwaymen, dead or living—and anecdotes of clever Old Bailey pleaders,—these topics formed the staple of the discourse.

By half-past eight the business began to slacken; and towards nine the habitual frequenters of the shop were all disposed of. Dick Melmoth and the Foundling then went into the adjoining room to get their breakfast; and the Hangman posted himself on the threshold of the door to "catch a whiff of air," as he said, after the bustle and heat of his morning's avocations.

Having remained there for a few minutes, thinking over the adventures at the dark crib in Jacob's Island, he was about to follow his assistants into the parlour, when he suddenly observed no less a person than Mr. Lawrence Sampson, the chief officer of Bow Street, coming down the lane from the direction of Newgate. A pang of uneasiness shot through the heart of Jack Ketch at the sight of this formidable functionary—especially as the recent crime of the Folly Bridges was at the instant uppermost in his memory: but he as promptly composed himself with the reflection that if Larry, as he was familiarly called, meant mischief, he would not be coming alone nor in such an indifferent leisurely manner as that at which he was now advancing. Besides, the Hangman felt well assured that the crime could not possibly be known as yet, even if it were ever destined to transpire at all; and as for any information that the young lady might have given relative to her adventures at the dark crib, it could not be otherwise than exceedingly vague, and must necessarily stop short of the chapter that contained the crowning tragedy of the night.

Having thus rapidly reasoned to himself, Daniel Coffin recovered all his wonted equanimity and dogged indifference by the time Mr. Lawrence Sampson came near his door.

This individual, who has already been more than once alluded to in our pages, was the most celebrated thief-taker of the time. Not that he had ever performed any remarkable acts of desperate valour: but his skill in the process of detecting a criminal or unravelling the most intricate skein of mysterious crime, was extraordinary. Nothing could equal his shrewdness in catching up the faintest circumstance that might afford a clue to the object of his search or the aim of his investigation. Incidents, so trivial that even the astutest of his colleagues would have passed them over unnoticed, were by him seized upon as straws showing which way the wind blew;—and his keenness in getting upon the trail of a criminal was only equalled by his unwearying perseverance and consummate art in following up the scent. Marvellous tales are told of the searching penetration and wondrous ingenuity of the Red Indians in thus detecting an enemy's track and pursuing the chase, even though rivers should have been crossed and the trail thus broken suddenly: but nothing of the kind that is related concerning the savage aboriginals of North America could possibly exceed in vivid interest and astonishing skill the exploits of Lawrence Sampson when unravelling the mysteries of London crime or employed in the detection of its hidden perpetrators.

In physical construction he seemed but little adapted for so perilous, fatiguing, and harassing a life. Slightly formed, he was what is called a dapper-looking man; and though he was remarkably active, his muscular strength was by no means great. He dressed with great plainness, and had not the least air of pretension about him: nor was there any expression of vulgar cunning in his countenance. His looks had a certain keenness and his lips denoted the utmost decision of character: but as he walked along the street, he did not appear to take any inordinate notice of either men or things. He had sleek red hair, a very freckled face, and large greenish eyes; and his age might be about eight-and-thirty.

Such was the famous Larry Sampson, the head officer of Bow Street.

That he should now be coming from the direction of Newgate, was nothing extraordinary, inasmuch as his avocations necessarily rendered him a frequent visitor to that gaol; and that he should be passing down Fleet Lane was also natural enough, seeing that it afforded the shortest cut into Farringdon Street, supposing that he was on his way straight back to Bow Street. Indeed, there was scarcely a week in which Sampson did not visit Newgate a dozen times, and take Fleet Lane in his way, either coming or going, on at least six or eight of those occasions. All these reflections did the Hangman make in the course of a few moments; and the result was a perfect men-

tal easiness as to the presence of the officer in his neighbourhood.

"Holloa, Mr. Sampson!" he exclaimed, as Larry seemed about to pass on the opposite side of the way without noticing him: "how are you this morning sir?"

"Ah! Daniel," cried the functionary, stopping short: "I really did not observe you at the moment, nor yet recollect that I was going by your house. In fact I was thinking of some information which I have received from a fellow in Newgate, who has peached against his comrades in a job that was done down in the country some months ago."

"You're always on the look-out, Mr. Sampson," observed Jack Ketch, now totally relieved of any little lingering apprehension or misgiving that night have remained in his mind relative to Larry's presence in Fleet Lane so soon after the tragedy of the Folly Bridges.

"Well, I am obliged to be pretty sharp, Daniel, at times," said the officer. "But business never was so slack as at the present moment."

"Nothing doing, eh, Mr. Sampson?" remarked Coffin.

"Nothing of any consequence," was the reply. "Indeed I had not a single job in hand till I got this little information just now at Newgate: and I was thinking yesterday of going out of town for a few days' holiday."

"Well, why don't you, sir?" said the Hangman. "I'm sure no one deserves a holiday more than you do: you have worked hard enough in your time and sent a shoal of rascals through my hands. Ah! sir, many a fellow that you begun with I've finished with: the officer first—the executioner last. That's the way of the world."

"Why, you are moralizing, Daniel," exclaimed Sampson, with a laugh. "I have half a mind to treat you to a pot of egg-flip at the public house, only I am afraid of making your hand unsteady for shaving."

"Well, thank'ee, sir," said the Hangman, "I don't care about liquor this morning—I mean so early in the morning. I drank a little too much last night and feel out of sorts."

"What? Keeping it up at the public-house down at the corner—eh?" observed Larry, with another good-natured smile. "I dare say you spent last night the produce of all the beards that had blunted your razor in the morning. But talking of razors puts me in mind that I came out unshaved: and so you shall operate upon me, Daniel."

"You do me honour, Mr. Sampson," said Jack Ketch. "Walk in, sir."

Larry accordingly entered the shop—sate down—and resigned himself to the tonsorial skill of the Hangman.

This miscreant had often wondered whether his secret mode of life was at all suspected by Sampson; and his guilty conscience had on several occasions led him to fancy that the officer eyed him with a degree of suspicion. But that functionary's present conduct was a complete reassurance in respect to all past misgivings: for as the Hangman deftly manipulated the razor over Larry's chin, he thought to himself, "If he did know any ill concerning me, he would naturally fancy that I must suspect he had acquired this knowledge; and he would not in such a case trust his life in my hands as he is doing at this moment. One single gash across the carotid—and all would be over with Mr. Lawrence Sampson! But, no—he has not an idea that I am anything besides a penny barber and the public executioner: and I may make myself perfectly easy on this head."

These reflections swept through the Hangman's brain during the first minute that he was shaving the officer: and then, for an instant—but only for an instant—he thought what a good thing it would be for the whole tribe of criminals in London if he were just to draw his razor across Sampson's throat. But the idea was instantaneously discarded—not through any sudden fit of compunction, but because detection must instantaneously follow the committal of such a desperate deed in an open shop at broad day-light. Nevertheless the thought *was* entertained by the Hangman for a moment—though only a single moment. The temptation was so great: the throat was so conveniently held up—the razor so handy! And then there was the momentary indefinable impulse to do the deed—just as the individual leaning over a precipice or the parapet of a high tower, longs to leap down in spite of himself. Verily, for a single instant did Mr. Lawrence Sampson's life hang by a thread: and if he had known the nature of the idea which thus seized for that moment, with the gripe of a demon, upon the mind of Daniel Coffin, he would not probably have continued to sit so calmly and confidently as he did.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FOUNDLING.

"You must see a number of strange faces from day to day, Daniel," observed Mr. Sampson, as he rose from the chair and proceeded to wash the remains of the lather from his face.

"Ah! you're right, sir,—I believe you," returned the Hangman: "some very queer customers at times. There's many a man I've shaved in this room and afterwards tucked up in the Old Bailey. You remember Peter Pluffers, Mr. Sampson?"

"Who committed the horrid murder down in Chelsea, you mean?" said Larry. "Why, I rather think that it was I who traced the crime to him and got up all the evidence that was brought forward at the trial."

"To be sure—so it was!" exclaimed the Hangman. "Well, sir, the very day after the murder he came and got shaved here, and talked about it with as much coolness as if he was as innocent as a lamb. Of course I hadn't the least suspicion concerning him; and I little thought as I lathered his throat that I should put a hempen neckcloth round it precisely that day four weeks. But so it was: and when we stood on the drop together, just as I was going to pull the night-cap down over his face, he says, '*Dan'el*,' says he, '*do you recollect shaving me just this day month?*—'*To be sure I do, Peter*,' says I.—'*Well*,' says he, '*when I felt your hand touch my neck on that occasion, I had a sort of a sensation come over me all no how, but just like a secret warning at the moment that your fingers would soon touch my neck for another pur-*

murderers at once determined to do their dreadful work. A door opened from the passage on to the little wooden gallery at the back of the house; and the inanimate form of the knife-grinder was speedily conveyed thither. A profound silence reigned throughout Jacob's Island—and not a light was visible at any window. The morning was just breaking—but a mist hung over the neighbourhood, and through it was seen the ditch, black and stagnant.

Over the parapet of the wooden gallery did the miscreants push the senseless form of the knife-grinder: they loosened their hold—the victim fell—there was a heavy splash—and, without waiting to see more, the murderers glided back into the dwelling, where they instantaneously extinguished the candle.

At the same moment there was a rush of water in the black ditch—the flood-gates were just opened at the manufactory on the wharf—and the tide of the Thames came pouring in with unusual rapidity and volume. The purer waters mingling with the muddy contents of the dyke rolled on in turbid eddies; and the miscreants, as they sate silent and motionless in the little back room, heard the gloomy plash against the piles and the overhanging floor under their feet.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BARBER'S SHOP.

Dim and shivering, the twilight of early dawn was dragging itself slowly and irresolutely from the eastern horizon; and the modern Babylon began to awaken from its night of repose. But how gradual was this arousing of the mighty city; and how strangely its process followed the same direction as the creeping course of morn itself! In the docks and wharves of the extreme east of London,—in the low neighbourhoods of Poplar, Limehouse, Stepney, and the Tower Hamlets, on one side of the river—and in the swampy districts of Rotherhithe and Bermondsey on the other,—did the sons and daughters of toil first begin to leave their humble beds and enter on the avocations of the day. Then, as the glimmerings of dawn passed sluggishly on in their westward course, did the process of wakening and rising continue in the same direction,—so that, on the northern side of the Thames, did Whitechapel, the City, Finsbury and Westminster gradually arouse themselves to the bustle of the new-born day—while the same signs of reviving animation began successively to develop themselves throughout the huge districts of Southwark and Lambeth. Thus last of all did the rich ones of the West End and of the mansions of Pimlico slowly put off the trammels of sleep and quit their downy beds, to resume their worthless and indolent career of luxuriousness, and pamper their appetites with the produce of the toil of the starving millions.

But long before the infamous idleness of the West End had even awakened from its first sleep, and while the thousand churches of London were proclaiming the hour of seven, the cheap barber's shop in Fleet Lane was opening to its customers. Narrow and dirty is that lane—a beggarly offshoot from the grandly wide and more respectable-looking thoroughfare of Farringdon Street: narrow and dirty, we say, it is even at the present day—but in the times of which we are writing, it was one of the filthiest and vilest places in the whole neighbourhood. The dingy dwellings were crowded from cellar to attic with the poorest families, penury fostering all kinds of demoralization, and demoralization expanding into crime. Groups of ragged urchins and half-naked girls were seen playing in the gutters from morning to night, and appeasing the cravings of hunger with the refuse and offal they picked up. At the door-ways slattern women and ferocious-looking fellows, or pale-faced famished creatures and worn-out dispirited artizans, might be observed talking together at all hours of the day; and a peep into the public-houses would show little assemblies of the vilest and most dissolute, brawling or indulging in obscene jests over their drink. The windows of the houses were black with grime; and the broken panes were stopped up with dingy pieces of paper pasted over, or old rags stuffed through the holes.

The cheap barber's shop was situate mid-way up the lane, on the left hand side going from Farringdon Street. This was the establishment of Daniel Coffin, who dwelt in that neighbourhood because it was immediately contiguous to Newgate, at which gaol his functions as public executioner were often exercised in those sanguinary times when the aristocracy ruled predominant, its sway being then as yet undisputed by the middle classes. The aristocracy had therefore every opportunity of manifesting the cruel instincts which are inherent in its very nature; and the result was that it was by no means unusual to see six, eight, or ten criminals hung up at the door of Newgate on a Monday morning. The laws, made by that aristocracy, first drove men to commit crime in their desperation, and then sent these unfortunate victims to the gibbet. Oh! what murders—what atrocious, cold-blooded murders have thus been perpetrated in the name of justice and under cover of the law!

Scarcely a Monday passed without an execution in those times when the madman George III was King, and when the unprincipled voluptuary his eldest son was Prince Regent. Daniel had therefore enough to do on the first day of every week; and it was his fearful occupation as Jack Ketch which had gradually brutalized him to such an extent that he plunged into the ways of deepest, darkest turpitude, as the reader has already seen.

The Hangman had been brought up as a hairdresser's apprentice; and he kept a barber's shop as a cloak and a blind for the infamy of his secret but far more lucrative pursuits. He was a widower: his wife had died somewhat suddenly about nine years previous to the date of our tale—and it was of course generally whispered that she had met foul play at his hands. Having plenty of money at his command, in consequence of his nefarious practices, he was wont to assist the poor wretches dwelling in his neighbourhood; but this "benevolence" on his part was only a matter of calculation and policy, and not the result of any really good feeling. The pittances which he occasionally thus expended, purchased for him immunity from those insults and jeers, and perhaps rough usage, which would otherwise have been bestowed upon the man

who filled the hateful post and bore the shocking appellation of Jack Ketch. In addition to these little "charities," he shaved for a lower fee than any other barber in the vicinage; and therefore he was patronised by the poor men to whom such cheapness was an object, and by the ruffians who either belonged to his gang or experienced a brutal delight in the conversation of so renowned a personage as the Public Hangman.

Daniel Coffin occupied the whole dwelling to which his shop belonged. His establishment consisted of a woman who lived with him as his mistress and served as his housekeeper, and a couple of young men who acted as his assistants. The elder of these young men and the woman were brother and sister; and their name was Melmoth. The former was twenty-seven years of age—the latter about a couple of years younger. The other assistant was nineteen, and was known only as Jack the Foundling. He never had any other name to his knowledge; and from his infancy he had been brought up with the Melmoths. About seven or eight years previously to the date of our narrative, the Hangman had picked up the three in a place of resort for juvenile thieves, called the Kinchin-Ken, in Grub-street; and, taking a fancy to the girl, he had proposed to her to live with him, his wife having recently died. But Sally Melmoth had refused to separate from her brother Dick, and from the Foundling, whom she loved also like a brother; and the Hangman therefore took the "lot," as he denominated them, into his house. From that day forth they had lived with him; and the young men were so brutalized by the whole tenour of their existence, that they felt no indignation nor regret at seeing Sally, whom they both really loved, the mistress of the Hangman.

Sarah—or Sally, as she was familiarly called—was short and slightly made. Her countenance was pale and even emaciated with the effects of early immorality and continued dissipation. She possessed that cast of countenance which, had she led a proper life, would have rendered her good-looking. Her hair was dark brown and might have proved a rich adornment, had it been duly cared for: her teeth were good—but her lips had the vivid redness that denotes the habitual use of ardent spirits. Her figure was naturally well formed, though slender; and the bust, which was well developed, would have been pronounced positively fine: but the same destructive causes which had marred her in other respects, had injured her appearance in this, and the plumpness of youth was merging rapidly into a premature flaccidity.

Her brother Richard—or Dick, as he was invariably called—was short, thin, and pale like his sister. He had a face which if not precisely villanous, was still indicative of a low cunning and evil artfulness, with which expression were mingled the traces of dissipation.

Jack the Foundling was, as we have already stated, nineteen years of age; and although young and remarkably handsome, yet profligacy had stamped its indelible marks upon his countenance, rendering his features a lamentable index to the utter desecration which had taken place in the sanctuary of his mind. He was tall and well formed, with a frame at once lithe and well-knit—supple and muscular; and there was something intellectual and lofty in the formation of his features. But this effect, which might have been so grandly developed, was entirely counteracted, and approaching fast to complete obliteration, under the influence of those evil passions and pursuits which gave the features their expression.

Having thus glanced at the individuals belonging to the Hangman's household, we will pause to say a few words relative to his shop, and then pursue the thread of our narrative.

Picture to yourself, reader, a small room, with the blackened walls embellished by prints representing the execution of several noted highwaymen—a mantle-piece covered with black-handled razors, lather-brushes, soap-boxes, and scissors—a few packages of soap, some hair-brushes, combs, and tooth-brushes, scattered about in the window, with a rude barber's-block mounting sentry in the midst—a jack-towel hung to a door communicating with an inner room—a basin and broken jug for the accomodation of customers—and two or three chairs for the use of the said customers,—picture all these details, gentle reader, and you have the Hangman's shop present to your mind's eye.

It was seven o'clock in the morning following the adventures so recently narrated: and the establishment of Mr. Daniel Coffin was opened to the public. Dick Melmoth took down the broken, ricketty shutters—Jack the Foundling hung out the barber's pole—and Sally just dragged a brush over the floor of the shop, as a sort of make-believe for sweeping it. She then retired to the kitchen to prepare the breakfast, while the two young men put on dirty aprons and got in readiness the tin-cans of hot water and the shaving-apparatus.

By the time these preliminaries were arranged, the Hangman made his appearance in the shop. He had not laid aside his clothes all night, nor snatched a moment's repose: indeed it was past six o'clock when he returned home from the Folly Bridges. But he had refreshed himself with what he called "a good wash:" and although he declared he felt "uncommonly seedy," it was all the same in respect to his looks, which were naturally so ghastly and repulsive that no influence of dissipation, emotion, or fatigue could render their aspect much worse.

"Well, got all neat and tidy, I hope," he observed in a tone of subdued growling, as he glanced round the shop: for he was evidently in no very amiable humour. "Nobody been yet, I suppose?"

"It's only just gone seven," answered the Foundling.

"I don't care a fig what it's gone," responded the Hangman, gruffly: "I wanted to know whether anybody was come."

"Nobody, then," replied the lad, pertly.

"None of your impudence, young fellow," exclaimed Coffin; "or I'll give you the strap across your back."

"Then don't talk sulky to me, that's all," said the Foundling. "I'm civil to you: why can't you be so to me?"

"Come, let's have no quarrelling," observed Dick Melmoth. "We've too much of it sometimes."

"And whose fault is that?" demanded Coffin, savagely. "Don't I keep you well—feed you well—and give you plenty of pocket-money? What more do you want?"—and he eyed the young men ferociously, one after the other.

They seemed to understand his humour, and

pose.'—And so it was, you see, Mr. Sampson," added Jack Ketch, as he coolly stropped his razor.

"But you not only witness strange coincidences, Daniel," observed the officer: "you must likewise hear strange things. For we all know that a barber's shop is the regular place for a good gossip. By the bye, you may as well cut my hair a little, while I have got my coat and cravat off:"—and Mr. Sampson resumed his seat.

"With much pleasure, sir," exclaimed the Hangman, laying down the razor and taking up the scissors.

At this moment a poor costermonger entered the shop to be shaved; and Coffin summoned his junior assistant, Jack the Foundling, to operate upon the man.

"You have a fine young fellow there as an apprentice, Daniel," observed the officer: "a very fine young fellow, indeed."

"He's not an apprentice, sir—only an assistant—but he lives with me altogether," said the Hangman. "Jack, this is Mr. Lawrence Sampson——"

"I know the gentleman well enough," remarked the Foundling, eyeing the officer with the deepest respect. "I don't like his profession, though: but I think him the greatest man that ever belonged to it all the same."

"I am much obliged to you for the compliment," said Larry, with a smile.

"I've read the history of Jonathan Wild, the celebrated thief-taker," continued the Foundling, as he soaped the costermonger's face: "but he was a vulgar, common kind of thief-taker in comparison with you, Mr. Sampson. Besides, he was a precious scoundrel——"

"And you mean that I am not?" observed Larry, in a mild tone of good-humour, as he perceived the young man had stopped short with sudden confusion and embarrassment. "Come, explain yourself—and whatever you may say, I shall not be in the least offended, I can assure you."

"Well, sir," resumed the Foundling, "I was going to observe that Jonathan Wild was a thundering rascal, because he employed thieves and then turned round upon them and handed them over to justice. But you do nothing of the kind; and you follow your calling openly and straightforward. I'm not such a fool as to believe but what such persons as yourself are necessary; and therefore no one can blame you for being an officer. But if you was like Jonathan Wild, I should think no more of sticking a knife into you——"

"Halloa! what's that?" growled the Hangman, savagely. "Who told you, Master Jack, to talk in that style? I'm sure I've brought you morally and respectably since you first came to live with me—I had you learned to read and write, of which you was as ignorant as the cross-beam of the gibbet——"

"Well, I know all that, Mr. Coffin," interrupted the young man, hastily. "I didn't mean any harm by what I said—and as Mr. Sampson told me to speak out plainly——"

"To be sure I did," continued Larry. "Don't be angry with him, Daniel," he observed, addressing himself to the Hangman: "he has said nothing to give me offence. What books are you most fond of reading, my lad?" he inquired, again speaking to the assistant.

"Everything about robbers, pirates, highwaymen, and banditti," answered the Foundling. "I wish you would put all your adventures, Mr. Sampson, into a book and print it: I should be the first to buy a copy. What things you must have seen and heard!" he exclaimed, with a look of wonder and curiosity at the renowned thief-taker.

"Well, I have got a curious note-book at home," said Larry: "and I may show you a few things in it one of these days."

"Oh! thank you, sir—thank you!" exclaimed the Foundling, joyfully. "When do you think you could make it convenient——"

"Come, Jack," interrupted the Hangman, "you must not press Mr. Sampson like this. Whenever he has got a leisure day, I have no doubt he will be kind enough to recollect his promise. But if Mr. Sampson would condescend to put his feet under my table and take a little friendly dinner with me——"

"Well, we shall see about that one of these days," observed Larry. "But I was telling you just now that I am so slack of occupation at present I was thinking of taking a trip into the country. Now, if you can spare your assistant for a couple of days, he shall come and pass them with me; and I will endeavour to amuse him."

"You do him a very great honour, sir," replied the Hangman, who all along had adopted a submissive and respectful bearing towards the celebrated thief-taker: and with evident satisfaction at the proposal just made, he added, "I'm sure Jack will be delighted to accept your kind invitation."

"Then put up your little necessaries in a bundle and come along with me at once," said Mr. Sampson, the cutting of whose hair was just finished.

"I shan't be a moment, sir!" exclaimed the Foundling, his eyes beaming with joy: and having hastily snatched off the towel from the costermonger's face and flung down the razor and lather-brush, he hurried up stairs to his bed room.

"I'll just tell him to put on his best clothes, sir," remarked the Hangman: and without waiting for a reply, he hastened after his young assistant.

On reaching the lad's chamber, Daniel Coffin found him already getting out his Sunday apparel and clean linen to put on; while a handkerchief was spread out upon the bed to receive the other articles of clothing and little necessaries which he purposed to tie up in it.

"Jack," said the Hangman, in a tone unusually kind and conciliatory, "I'm devilish glad Larry Sampson has taken you by the hand in this way. You will want some pocket-money, my lad—because you must cut a decent figure at Larry's house; and so here's a couple of guineas for you."

"Thank'ee, Mr. Coffin," returned the Foundling, as he consigned the coins to his pocket. "I shall keep my eyes and my ears well open while I'm with Mr. Sampson."

"That's just what I want, Jack," exclaimed the Hangman. "You must endeavour to get as deep an insight as possible into all his dodges, and learn as much of his craft as you can."

"Oh! you needn't fear but what I shall do that," answered the lad, as he proceeded with his hasty toilet.

"And also try and find out whether he entertains any suspicion about me, Jack," continued the Hangman. "I don't think he does—indeed, I'm almost certain he doesn't: but still it's just as well to ascertain the exact truth."

"Depend upon it, Mr. Coffin," responded the Foundling, "I'll suck him as far as such a leary cove can be sucked at all."

"And if he wants you to stay any longer with him than the two days, don't refuse, Jack," said the Hangman: "I can very well spare you for such a purpose—and if you succeed in getting any useful information out of Larry, I'll give you five guineas for yourself and a week's holiday to spend 'em in."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Coffin—I'll do my best," exclaimed the Foundling, as he completed his hurried toilet. "And now I'll just say good bye to Dick and Sally—and then I'll be off with the thief-catcher."

In the meantime Larry Sampson had been left alone in the shop for a few minutes,—the costermonger having taken his departure the moment he was shaven. While brushing his hair, the officer looked leisurely and steadily round the place, his eyes seeming to penetrate into every nook, corner, and crevice. The piece of paper on which the Hangman had wiped the soap off his razor, had been tossed into the grate: Larry's keen look observed writing upon it—and he picked it up. A hasty glance over it was sufficient to induce him to keep it: he accordingly folded it up and consigned it to his waistcoat pocket.

Presently Jack the Foundling re-appeared, dressed somewhat flashily, and with the bundle in his hand; and Larry, having taken his leave of the Hangman, departed in company with the youthful assistant In Farringdon Street they entered a hackney coach, and were thence driven to Mr. Sampson's house in Long Acre.

The Bow Street functionary was unmarried, and possessed a neat bachelor residence. He had his dining-room and breakfast-parlour—his drawing-room and bed-chamber—and in addition thereto, a private apartment into which no one save himself and housekeeper ever entered. He was well off, his avocations having proved most lucrative; and if he now continued them, it was from habit and also from an aversion to idleness rather than from a positive love of gain. His housekeeper was an elderly female of the highest respectability, and who was generally called Dame Margery by Sampson and his friends, or Mrs. Margery by the servant-of-all-work and the tradespeople.

When Sampson introduced Jack the Foundling to the Dame, and quietly observed that he was one of Daniel Coffin's assistants who had come to pass a day or two with him, the worthy woman neither manifested surprise nor displeasure that her master should bring home such queer company: for she knew full well that Larry must have some deep design or powerful motive of his own in adopting such a course. She therefore welcomed the Foundling kindly, and at once showed him to the chamber which was to be his own while he remained at the house.

Having unpacked his little bundle of necessaries, given his hair another brush, and satisfied himself by a good long stare in the mirror that "he was quite the thing," the Foundling returned to the parlour where a copious breakfast had been put on the table during his temporary absence. The eyes of the young man were regaled and his appetite sharpened by the view of cold veal pie, a fine ham, rashers of bacon and eggs, and all the usual accessories to the morning's repast.

"Now," said Larry, in a plain and unostentatious manner, "you are going to make yourself quite at home during your visit to me; and on my side, I do not intend to treat you as a stranger. So please to sit down and partake of just what you like. If you don't fancy chocolate or coffee, which are both on the table, you can have wine, spirits, or malt liquor. Only say the word, and your wishes shall be complied with."

The Foundling thanked Mr. Sampson for his kindness, but assured him that he required nothing beyond what was now before him. Having been called away from his own breakfast in Fleet Lane to operate upon the costermonger's beard, the young man found plenty of appetite for the present banquet, as the repast really was in his eyes. He accordingly fell to work in good earnest, and made considerable havoc upon the various viands that appeared upon the board. When he had eaten as much as he could and had disposed of his third cup of chocolate, his hospitable entertainer poured him out a glass of some rich French cordial; and the young man already began to think to himself how agreeable it would be to dwell in such comfortable quarters for the remainder of his days.

"And now, my young friend," said Mr. Sampson, when the breakfast table was cleared, "you will permit me to have a little conversation with you;—for I must tell you candidly that I have taken an interest in your welfare, which is not the less sincere on account of its being so suddenly inspired. Tell me, then, any particulars concerning yourself which you may choose to mention."

"In the first place, sir," answered the young man, whose heart was warmed towards his entertainer by the good cheer so hospitably provided and so copiously partaken of, "I must tell you that I have no other name, to my knowledge, except Jack the Foundling."

"Did you never know your parents?" inquired Sampson.

"Never, sir. I was brought up in a place which you must know very well by name—the Kinchin-Ken* in Grub Street."

"I do know it well," observed the Bow Street officer. "And now you need not mind telling me anything you choose about yourself or any misdeeds that you have committed: for I would sooner render you a service than do you an injury—and I have some scheme in my head regarding you—a scheme which you will perhaps be glad to hear explained. But all depends upon your frankness and candour towards me. In a single word, I will be your friend, if you prove yourself deserving of my friendship. Come—take another glass of this cordial: it will give you courage to enter into particulars that are not perhaps the most pleasant for your feelings or your recollections."

"Depend upon it I will deal candidly with you, sir," replied the Foundling: then, having tossed off the *liqueur*, he felt the warmth of his heart in-

* Literally "children's house:" really a place for juvenile thieves of both sexes.

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creasing towards Mr. Lawrence Sampson. "You speak of my recollections, sir," he continued,—"why, the earliest recollections that I have are associated with that Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street. It seems, from all I have ever been able to learn relative to myself, that I was stolen from my parents when a baby and brought up by a woman named Shickster Sal."*

"I knew her," observed Sampson. "She was the mistress of the fellow who presided over the gang of juvenile thieves frequenting the Kinchin-Ken, and who bears the name of the Kinchin-Grand to the present day, although the nest of iniquity has been broken up. Shickster Sal has been dead some years: but the Kinchin-Grand is still alive and in London."

"Yes—he seems to have abandoned his old ways and now keeps a small chandler's-shop on Mutton Hill, Clerkenwell. But, talking of myself," continued the Foundling, "I was going to tell you that although Shickster Sal brought me up, as one may say,—such a bringing up as it was!—yet I was more indebted to two other persons, who were then mere children themselves, for any kindness that was bestowed upon my infancy. These persons were Richard and Sarah Melmoth——"

"I know who they are," observed Larry Sampson, in his quiet way. "Dick Melmoth is your fellow-assistant at Coffin's shop—and Sally Melmoth is Coffin's housekeeper. Their father committed some dreadful crimes about nineteen or twenty years ago, and then put a period to his own existence. His eldest son, James—the brother of Richard and Sarah now living—also met a violent death just at the same time as his father. The lad threw some horrible missile at a nobleman in

* *Shickster* means "Lady:" the appellation was given because the young woman referred to had been well brought up in her earlier years, before she fell into depraved society and profligate habits.

Grafton Street, and was killed at the same time as his victim."

"So I have been told," said the young man: "and what is more, it was that very same lad, James Melmoth, who originally brought me, when a baby a few months old, to the Kinchin-Ken in Grub street. He found me, it was said—or else he himself was the person who stole me: but whichever it was, I have never been able to learn. At all events, his surviving brother and sister got to like me just as if I was *their* brother—and so I was brought up amongst the juvenile thieves, blackguards, and prostitutes of the precious den in Grub Street. You can guess, Mr. Sampson, what were the lessons I learnt for some years, till Mr. Coffin took us all three to live in his house. That was about eight or nine years ago: and ever since then we've remained there."

"And you have of course been happier," observed the Bow Street officer. "You have learnt to read and write——"

"Well, sir," interrupted the Foundling, "I'll tell you how it was. It seems that Dick Melmoth was eight years old when his father killed himself: and until within a few months of that event, the Melmoth family had been respectably brought up. It was some terrible series of misfortunes that broke up their home—killed the mother—and drove the father pretty near wild. Previous to those misfortunes, I was saying, his conduct was very different; which was proved by the circumstance that Dick could read quite well and write tolerably—aye, and say his prayers too. So when Dick and Sal were left all alone in the world and flung amongst the kinchin-prigs* at the ken in Grub Street, the brother found time to teach his little sister to read and write, although they went out begging or stealing all day. Well, after we went to live with Mr. Coffin, Dick used to read any books that fell in his way; and he one day read the life of Jonathan Wild aloud. I was so delighted that I was determined to be able to read that and other books for myself; and so I got Dick to teach me. As soon as I was able to read, he taught me to write—and then I went on improving myself."

"And so this is the boasted kindness of Mr. Coffin towards you—eh?" exclaimed Larry Sampson, laughing. "Why, to hear him talk just now, one would have thought that he had engaged a tutor to instruct you. But I suppose he took a certain degree of merit to himself in the circumstance that you learnt to read and write at *his* house. However, it is much to your credit that you have thus become enabled to read and write at all; though I think your selection of books does not appear to have been the wisest."

"But consider how I was brought up, Mr. Sampson," exclaimed the young man, earnestly—for he experienced a profound desire to ingratiate himself into the favour of the Bow Street officer—not only because this individual had hinted at his intention to do something for him, but also because he was now conversing for the first time in his life with some one who deprecated the ways of profligacy and vice instead of encouraging him to pursue them.

"Yes—I make every allowance for the way in which you were reared and trained, young man," said the officer; "and I sympathise with you. Few people have better opportunities than I of understanding and appreciating all that there is dreadful, wretched, and deplorable in the condition of those unfortunate beings who are made outcasts from society by circumstances rather than by their own innate predisposition to vice. I have seen and heard enough, during my long experience as an officer of justice, to be convinced that the whole social system is rotten at its core. There is a small but highly favoured class in the community which monopolises everything—and the inevitable consequence is a wide-spread pauperism amongst the masses. From this pauperism all species of demoralization, vice, iniquity, and crime are necessarily engendered; and those unfortunates whom we call the *outcasts* of society, are in reality its *victims*."

"Ah! sir," exclaimed the Foundling, strangely excited and deeply moved by the observations which he had just heard: "you have only expressed in words certain ideas which have for some time past been floating, vaguely and dimly, as one may say, in my imagination. You have suddenly given form, and shape, and substance to those images which have been flitting for two or three years before my mind's eye. For whenever I have reflected upon the misdeeds of my own life, I have asked myself how I could possibly help being what I have been or what I am! The king's own son, if brought up as I was, and under precisely the same circumstances, would be exactly like me: he would have gone through the same ordeal—have done the same things—have had his mind trained and his course shaped in the same direction. I have known what it is, sir, when quite a child, to go through the streets, shoeless and in rags—shivering with the bitter cold, and crying for hunger. That was before I was old enough to steal for myself, and when my companions were either hiding from the officers of justice or had been so unsuccessful in their own thieving pursuits as to want even a morsel of bread for themselves. I have endured every kind of privation; and I have likewise been steeped to the lips in all profligacies. When I was only nine years old I was had up before the magistrate for begging. I told him that I had neither father or mother—or at least, that I did not know them. He sent me to the House of Correction, where I was half starved and brutally treated. Two years afterwards, when I was eleven, I was had up again: but this time it was thieving. I was sent to gaol; and there I was well fed and well treated. Of course, when I came out I preferred thieving to begging. For either the one or the other I was liable to be taken up, both being crimes: but the thief being treated better than the beggar, it was natural I should choose the pursuit of the former. Soon afterwards I was taken to live with Mr. Coffin: or else I should have gone on as a petty thief up to this day. And now, perhaps, you will spurn me from you, since I have told you that I have been in prison as a thief——"

"Not a bit of it, my poor lad," exclaimed Sampson, taking his hand. "I am only surprised that half your life has not been passed in prisons. But the subject is now becoming painful to you—and we will postpone the farther discussion of it until the evening. You have been talking a long time—and it is my turn to do something to entertain you."

* Juvenile thieves.

Larry Sampson accordingly began to narrate several anecdotes of his exploits in detecting notorious offenders and bringing them to justice: but we must now take leave of him and Jack the Foundling for the present, in order to direct the reader's attention to matters of a still more interesting and important nature.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE REVELATION OF THE CONSPIRACY.

The reader will be pleased to remember that the day of which we are now writing is Thursday—the incidents at Jacob's Island having occurred during the Wednesday night.

It was about ten in the morning, that Jocelyn Loftus issued forth from the Piazza Hotel, Covent Garden, where he was staying. On the previous day he had called in Stratton Street to inquire for Clara Stanley, but was told that she was out of town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford. It however appeared that they were expected home in the evening; and Jocelyn, having left the letter of introduction which his beloved Louisa had given him for her sister, desired the servant to say that he would call again the next morning.

He was therefore now on his way to Stratton Street: and taking the nearest cut from Covent Garden, through Leicester Square, into Piccadilly, he pursued his course at a somewhat brisk pace. He had reached the angle of Albemarle Street and was traversing the crossing, when his attention was suddenly drawn towards a young lady who hurried past him in so wild a manner that it appeared as if she were either demented or labouring under some extraordinary agitation. Turning sharply round the corner into Albemarle Street, she suddenly stopped short—seemed to reflect for a few moments—and then staggered against some iron railings as if she were about to fall down in a fit.

Jocelyn observed that she was very young—perhaps not more than sixteen—and that although she was handsomely dressed, her apparel was dirty and travel-soiled. Indeed, she looked as if she had been journeying a considerable distance on foot: and this circumstance, added to her evident distress of mind, instantaneously led the young gentleman to believe that she must be in some peculiar position of difficulty, danger, or embarrassment. His generous nature now prompted him to ascertain if he could possibly be of any service to her: for he well knew how perilous it was for so young a creature, and beautiful withal, to wander friendless and unprotected in the mighty mazes of the modern Babylon.

He therefore accosted her: but she did not immediately observe him;—and as she leant against the railings of some lordly mansion, he heard her exclaim to herself, "No—no—I will not go to *him!* He is one of the conspirators—he is as bad as the rest!"

A convulsive sob followed these words, choking any farther utterance of the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind: and turning abruptly round, she was about to retrace her hurried way into Piccadilly, when she beheld Jocelyn Loftus surveying her with a look of unmistakable compassion and respectful interest. She then seemed all in a moment to recollect that he must have caught the words which fell so agonizingly from her lips: and a deep blush overspread her countenance at the thought of the notice her extraordinary behaviour had thus attracted towards herself.

"Pardon the boldness of a total stranger thus venturing to address you," Jocelyn hastened to observe: "but if you have lost your way—or if there be any service which I can render you——"

"Yes, sir—yes—there is indeed a service which you can render me, if you be sincere and right-minded," exclaimed the young lady: then, instantaneously checking the wildness of her manner, she said, "But I have no right to address you in this style—I have no reason to meet your evident frankness with a base suspicion——"

"You are evidently labouring under a considerable degree of excitement," observed Jocelyn, in a tone of the kindest reassurance; "and I cannot be offended at anything you may say. I am a gentleman——but what is much more, I am a man of honour, and therefore incapable of treating you otherwise than with respectful consideration."

"I believe you, sir—I put implicit faith in you," said the young lady. "But what can you do for me?" she asked, her looks again resuming that wildness which Jocelyn had before noticed: and then the next moment, the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"You observed ere now," said Loftus, "that there was some service which I might render you. Believe me, young lady, that it must be an impossible one if I should refuse to succour a being so profoundly afflicted as you evidently are."

"Will you give me a home, sir?" she inquired, passionately: "and will that home be an honourable one? But, no—I do not demand so much at your hands," she instantaneously added: "if you will assist me to obtain a respectable lodging, where I may at least enjoy personal security, I will thank you — Oh! most cordially thank you! Though utterly without friends, I am not destitute of immediate resources——"

"We are attracting unpleasant notice," said Jocelyn. "Permit me to call a hackney-coach—and I will escort you to a place both of respectability and safety."

The young lady expressed her gratitude—a vehicle which was passing at the time, stopped in obedience to Jocelyn's summons—and he handed the fair stranger into it. Then, entering it also and placing himself on the seat opposite to her, he commanded the driver to take them to the Piazza Hotel, Covent Garden.

"I am only staying for a short time—indeed, I may say for only a few more hours—in London," he observed, as the hackney-coach moved on: "and I have no fixed residence of my own in this great city. But I will confide you to the care of the landlady of the hotel to which we are now proceeding; and though I shall be obliged to leave you again almost immediately, having a particular appointment to keep, I shall return in an hour or two. During that interval you will have gained some degree of composure—and you can then explain to me how I may farther serve you."

"Your kindness—your generosity will receive my eternal gratitude," said the young lady, burst-

ing into tears. "But, Oh! do not think ill of me—do not prejudge me, because you found me a friendless, homeless, unprotected wanderer! My story is a melancholy one—but it contains no narrative of guilt or frailty on my part——"

"Do not distress yourself, I implore you," exclaimed Jocelyn, "by even fancying for a moment that these assurances are necessary to interest me in your behalf. Presently you shall have an opportunity of giving me such explanations as you may volunteer: but remember that I seek them not as a right—much less as a condition of any service which I may have an opportunity of rendering you."

In this strain did the generous-hearted, noble-minded young man reassure and console the afflicted young lady; and by the time they reached the Piazza Hotel in Covent Garden, her agitation had completely subsided—a profound melancholy however succeeding it.

The mistress of the establishment was a worthy matron to whom Jocelyn had no hesitation nor scruple in confiding his fair companion: then, having reiterated his promise to return in an hour or two, he directed the hackney-coach to be driven back to Piccadilly, and in due time was set down in Stratton Street. To his inquiry at the mansion which bore the number of 13 upon the front door, he was informed that Miss Clara Stanley was now at home; and he was immediately conducted into a handsome drawing-room, where he found himself in the presence of a young lady of remarkable beauty, who rose from her seat and advanced with cordial manner to welcome him.

The impression mutually made at this first meeting of Clara Stanley and her sister's intended husband, was unexceptionably favourable. Jocelyn beheld before him a lady-like, charming, and unaffected being, who appeared to have acquired just a sufficiency of the polish of good society to supersede the awkwardness and embarrassment arising from a secluded life in the country, without any of the airs or artificial assumptions which too often accompany the refinement of what is called the fashionable world. On the other hand, Clara found herself in the presence of a handsome, elegant, and prepossessing young man, whose goodness of heart and intellectual superiority were plainly legible in his looks.

They sate down and began to converse. Clara naturally asked a thousand questions relative to her sister, all of which denoted the deeply-seated affection she experienced for that much-loved, amiable, gentle girl: she likewise spoke of her afflicted aunt—and then the tears for a few moments rained down her cheeks. Jocelyn, having responded to all her queries, proceeded to state that he had come up to London on purpose to arrange certain affairs previous to his marriage with Louisa; and he expressed a hope that when the bridal day arrived, Miss Clara Stanley would be enabled to leave London and be present at Canterbury on the occasion. The young lady replied that nothing should prevent her from acting in accordance with Jocelyn's and her sister's desire in this respect: and she then proceeded to express her regret that she could not have the pleasure of introducing Mr. Loftus to Mr. and Mrs. Beckford on the present occasion, as they were very old people and much fatigued with their excursion into the country on the preceding day. But she assured him that, through the attachment they had conceived for herself, they felt the liveliest interest in everything that concerned her sister, and would be happy to avail themselves of the earliest opportunity in future to form the acquaintance both of Louisa and Jocelyn. Clara likewise observed she thought it more than possible, and indeed almost certain, that Mr. and Mrs. Beckford would accompany her to Canterbury on the occasion of the approaching nuptials; and then, in allusion to herself, she remarked that the only manner in which she could testify her gratitude towards the kind benefactors who had adopted her as their daughter and intended to leave her all their fortune, was by remaining constantly with them. It was this feeling, she added, which had prevented her from paying even the shortest and most hurried visit to Canterbury to see her sister; and Jocelyn readily appreciated and acknowledged the force of Clara's observations in this respect.

In this manner did Loftus and Miss Stanley converse for upwards of an hour, the favourable impression mutually made at first being strengthened and confirmed by the protraction of the interview; and when Jocelyn rose to take his leave, Clara begged him to become the bearer of a letter and a present which she had prepared for her sister. He of course assented: and she placed in his hands a small packet, which he promised to deliver to Louisa on his return to Canterbury. They then separated: but scarcely had the door closed behind the young gentleman, when Clara burst out into an agony of bitter weeping and convulsive sobs, as if her surcharged bosom were now enabled, the instant she was alone, to find a vent for the feelings which she had been forced not only to stifle, but even to mask beneath smiles and an unnatural composure during the interview with her sister's intended husband.

On returning to the Piazza Hotel, Jocelyn Loftus inquired of the landlady concerning the afflicted young creature whom he had entrusted to her charge; and, on ascertaining that she was now comparatively tranquillised, he repaired to the apartment in which she was seated. The moment he entered, she began to express, with tears in her eyes, all the gratitude she experienced for the generous kindnes he had manifested towards her; and she besought him to listen to those explanations upon which she now felt herself in a fitting frame of mind to enter.

He accordingly took a seat near her; and she proceeded to address him in the following manner:—

"I have determined, Mr. Loftus,—for the mistress of this establishment has made me acquainted with your name,—to reveal to your ears all the dreadful secrets which now weigh upon my mind: for you have shown me so much kindness, that I must tax your generosity still farther by imploring your best advice and counsel. Listen then, I beseech you, to the extraordinary narrative which I am about to unfold; and I feel convinced that you will not regret the kindness you have already shown to a being so afflicted—so wretched—and yet so innocent as I."

There was a sincerity in the young lady's manner which confirmed the favourable opinion and strengthened the compassionate sympathy which Jocelyn had already experienced towards her; and

with a few kind words he encouraged her to proceed.

"I am the youngest of four sisters, living until yesterday with our widowed mother at Richmond," she continued; "and my name is Owen."

Loftus started visibly: then instantaneously checking his emotion or excitement, whatever the feeling might be, he said calmly, "I have heard of you before."

"Then perhaps you are aware," exclaimed Mary—for she it was,—"that the Royal Princes and several noblemen who are closely connected with them in the ties of friendship, have been constant visitors at our house—I fear," she added, with downcast eyes and a blushing countenance, "to the injury of our reputation."

"I am aware of the circumstance which you mention, Miss Owen," observed Loftus: "and I will not disguise the fact that scandal has busied itself with the name of your family. Is not the Marquis of Leveson one of the noblemen to whom you have alluded?"

"He is," replied Mary. "But permit me to give the details of my narrative in continuous order—and you will then understand the fearful secret which is the basis of that intimacy between my mother and the Royal Princes. It appears," continued the young lady, after a brief pause during which she collected her thoughts, "that from the first moment of the arrival in England of the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick, to become the wife of the Prince of Wales, she was destined to find a secret though remorseless and unrelenting enemy in the Queen.* For some years past a terrible conspiracy has been in existence against the unhappy Caroline. You are aware it was in 1795—nineteen years ago—that she became Princess of Wales. At the beginning of 1796 the Princess Charlotte was born: and from that period the Prince and Princess of Wales were completely estranged from each other. The Prince has declared that she shall never be Queen of England; and the mother, the present Queen, echoes the sentiment. I will not however extend my narrative unnecessarily. Suffice it to say that the Queen, the Prince Regent, two of his brothers, three or four noblemen, and four or five titled ladies, have all been leagued by solemn compact and in dread conspiracy for years past, to work the ruin of the Princess Caroline. Hence the investigation which took place in 1806, and which arose from the vile machinations, plots, and artifices of the conspirators. But her Royal Highness passed triumphantly through the ordeal, as you are doubtless well aware; and the conspirators were for the moment defeated. But they were not discouraged: and ever since have they been working, secretly but actively—pursuing their slimy ways like serpents in the grass—with all the resoluteness of their unpitying dispositions and fiendish purposes. In such an enterprise, however, the utmost delicacy and caution must necessarily be used; and the conspirators have determined to bide their time rather than precipitate matters so as to hazard another defeat. They know that each time a blow is struck, and that the Princess rises up unhurt from the assault, the effect is only to invest her cause with a larger amount of popularity and increase the odium attaching itself to her persecutors. In proportion to the sympathy bestowed upon the Princess by the naturally generous-hearted and noble-minded working-classes of England, so is the indignation excited against her enemies. All these facts have been well weighed by the conspirators; and they would consequently rather allow years to elapse while they draw in their snares and meshes closer around the Princess, than risk another failure by imprudent precipitation. They are now therefore working slowly—and they believe surely."

"Heavens! is it possible that such infamy can exist, and, in such high quarters?" exclaimed Jocelyn Loftus, his blood boiling with indignation and his eyes flashing fire. "Oh for the power—the means—the opportunity to warn the unhappy Princess of the tremendous perils by which she is environed——"

"You shall have all, Mr. Loftus—yes, all!" cried Mary, her countenance glowing with a kindred feeling of anger and disgust. "You shall have the power—the means—the opportunity: and God be thanked for having thrown in my way so generous a champion of the persecuted Caroline of Brunswick!"

"Continue your narrative, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn. "I will subdue my feelings while I listen to your dreadful tale."

"Amongst the various measures adopted to ensure the destruction of the Princess of Wales," resumed Mary, "is the scheme of surrounding her with the spies, creatures, and agents of the conspirators. Three or four years ago it was first suggested to the Prince Regent—I believe by the Marquis of Leveson—to train up an entire family of sisters to do this dreadful work. It was supposed, I should imagine, that several young ladies, thus closely connected by the ties of kinship, would be more certain to conduct their operations harmoniously, systematically, and confidentially, than a number of females having no such bond to unite them. The plan was greedily seized upon by the Prince Regent, the Queen, and the other conspirators: and the Marquis of Leveson then introduced the Royal Princes to our house. My mother corresponded

* In the First Series of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON," p. 219, Vol. II, the following passage occurred, descriptive of a hurried and whispered conversation between Queen Charlotte (George the Third's wife) and her son the Prince of Wales:—

"Put what construction you please upon my conduct, George," observed the Queen, after a few moment's consideration: "but let one thing at least be engraven on your memory—and let it serve as the text for all your self-communings at a future day!"—"And that one thing?" demanded the Prince, surveying his royal mother with mingled interest and curiosity. "What is it?"—"That in *me* the Princess Caroline has a bitter and an unforgiving enemy," rejoined the Queen, the words hissing snake-like through the lips that were white and quivering.—Bad and unprincipled as was the heir-apparent—heartless, cruel, and selfish as his disposition might be—he was nevertheless struck with a species of horror at this cold-blooded announcement on the part of his mother. A man may be a murderer himself, and can yet think well of human nature generally: but if he suddenly finds out that his own mother is a murderess—the being who possesses the *prestige* of all-excelling goodness in his eyes—his confidence in everything human is annihilated in an instant. Thus was it with the Prince of Wales. His own mother had suddenly thrown off the mask and revealed herself to him as a fiend in female shape:—and he gazed upon her in mingled horror, wonderment, and distress.—But she darted upon him a look full of contempt as much as to imply that even yet he did not half comprehend the true meaning of the words to which she had given utterance: then quitting him abruptly, she retired for the night.

with the Queen—and all was arranged. The project was to bend the minds of my sisters and myself to a thorough acquaintance with all species of refined duplicity and exquisite cunning—to render us plastic to every kind of artifice and deceit—to demoralize us thoroughly in mind, without actually destroying what the world would call our virtue. This process has been going on for four years. First, my eldest sister, when believed to be properly trained and broken into the specious system, was entrusted with the secret of its real motive: next my second sister was in due course initiated in the mysteries of the career for which she was destined;—then my third sister's turn came to receive the explanations;—and it was only on Tuesday last—the day before yesterday, in fact—that the veil was drawn away from before my own eyes. Oh! sir, it was dreadful—it was dreadful in the extreme—to hear a mother's lips inculcating such lessons as I then heard: but when I was told that arrangements had already been made for myself and my sisters to enter the service of the Princess of Wales, in the capacity of waiting-ladies, and that we were not only to become spies upon her actions but also to lay snares to entrap her into situations that would give her conduct the colour of guilt,—when I heard all this, I say, it seemed as if the very bottomless pit itself had suddenly opened at my feet, displaying all its ineffable horrors."

"Poor girl!" muttered Jocelyn, in a tone of deep compassion.

"Ah! sir, you may well pity me," exclaimed Mary, the tears streaming down her cheeks: then, hastily wiping them away, she said, "At first I was so astounded, amazed, and bewildered that I knew not what to think or how to act. But I will not trouble you with minute details relative to my own feelings; you will do me the credit to believe, sir, that they were harrowing and poignant in the extreme, though outwardly veiled, no doubt, by the sense of despair and consternation that was upon me. It was on Tuesday morning that my mother received a letter from her Majesty the Queen, stating that the time had now come for my sisters and myself to enter the service of the Princess of Wales. It appears that, whilst secretly plotting against the Princess, the Queen has all along pretended openly to be her friend; and they occasionally correspond. It was therefore an easy matter for her Majesty to recommend us to the notice of the Princess: and her Royal Highness was not likely to refuse the Queen's request that we should be thus taken into her household. The Princess, as you are of course aware, is now upon the Continent: and my mother having had an interview with the Prince Regent at Carlton House on Tuesday, returned home in the evening with the intimation that we were to proceed to Woolwich on the ensuing day and thence embark for France. Accordingly, every preparation being made, we yesterday repaired to Woolwich: but as the moment for embarkation drew nigh, my feelings became wrought up to such an intolerable pitch, that I penned a hasty note to my mother, and fled! In that note I declared how impossible it was for me to pursue the career for which I had been destined; and bidding farewell, in the hurried lines, to my mother and sisters, I expressed a hope that God would soften their hearts to repentance. But I believe I appended an assurance to the effect that I would not betray them. However, I left the note for them—and fled precipitately from Woolwich. Avoiding the main road, I wandered hither and thither in all directions—not knowing what course to adopt,—at one moment maddened by my feelings—at another sitting down and giving vent to my grief in floods of tears."

"How you must have suffered!" exclaimed Jocelyn. "But you had no alternative than to flee from the bosom of your own family."

"Such was the thought continually uppermost in my mind," observed Mary: "and although I was horrified when I contemplated what was to become of me, yet I did not once repent the step I had taken. However—to be brief—after many, many hours' wandering, and far into the night too, I reached the suburbs of London. My object was to obtain some respectable lodging: but when I made inquiries to that effect, I received so many insults that at last I wandered on without daring to accost another soul. Exhausted with fatigue I sank down upon the steps of a door, thinking that my very existence was ebbing away. A young woman came up and spoke kindly to me. I was cheered, and readily accompanied her to a house which she alleged to be her own home. But scarcely had I lain down to rest, when I was startled from my sleep by the presence of a man who had stolen into the chamber to warn me that I was in a den of thieves and murderers. I fled—I succeeded in effecting my escape, although pursued by some of the inmates of the house; and some honest labourers whom I met conducted me to a tavern near London Bridge, where I found alike security and repose. On rising again, I asked myself what course I should adopt: and I thought of visiting the Marquis of Leveson—throwing myself upon his mercy—and beseeching him to see my mother on my behalf. But on entering Albemarle Street, where his lordship lives, my mind misgave me: I remembered how deeply he was concerned in the conspiracy against the Princess—I recollected how artfully, unweariedly, and insidiously he had entered into the work of demoralizing the minds of my sisters and myself—and I dared not appeal to *him*. At that moment—in the moment of my bitter distress and blank despair—you addressed me, Mr. Loftus: and now you know all!"

"Miss Owen," said Jocelyn, "you have behaved in a manner which demands my esteem, as you had already obtained my sympathy. You have shrunk from the performance of a detestable part—and this would be a dreadful world indeed, if you were to be left friendless and an outcast on that account. You have solicited my advice—and I will give it: but you must first allow me to proffer you my friendship. I am engaged to be married to an excellent and amiable young lady who lives at Canterbury; and in her dwelling I can guarantee you an asylum until her union with me shall permit you to make my own house your home. Does this arrangement appear to suit you?—and will you accept it?"

"Oh! cheerfully—cheerfully!" exclaimed Mary, with tears of gratitude. "You are indeed a friend to me—and I will love your intended bride as if she were my sister. Yes—I accept your generous proposal with a fervid joy: for I dare not return

home to my mother—at least for the present—and I have no other friend but you."

"The business which has brought me to London is terminated," said Jocelyn; "and I care not how soon I set out on my return to Canterbury. If you feel yourself equal to the journey, after the night of wanderings, terrors, and brief slumber which you have passed, we will set out at once."

"I long—Oh! I long to leave London," exclaimed Mary: "for if I were to meet any of my mother's friends, I should be perhaps borne forcibly back to her—and she would overwhelm me with the bitterest reproaches for my conduct."

"We will lose no time in taking our departure," said Jocelyn. "It is now nearly one o'clock," he added, referring to his watch: "a post-chaise and four will bear us rapidly along—and by eight this evening we shall be in Canterbury."

Thus speaking, the young gentleman rang the bell to give the necessary orders for their departure.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WATCHERS AT THE GREEN DRAGON.

About the same hour at which the preceding conversation took place between Jocelyn Loftus and Mary Owen at the Piazza Hotel, Covent Garden, the redoubtable Captain Tash and his man Robin were thinking of lunch in an upper room at the *Green Dragon*, Knightsbridge.

These two worthies no longer formed items in the vast mass of the shabby-genteel tribe: they had cast their old skins and appeared in new ones with the bright gloss upon them. In plainer terms, they were each embellished with a bran new suit of clothes: but the influence of this great and striking personal improvement was very different in its effects upon the master and the man. For inasmuch as the former had become inflated with pride and pomposity to a degree that threw all his past self-sufficiency completely into the shade, the latter had grown more timid and bashful than ever, and did not seem to find any nook dark enough or any corner retired enough wherein to thrust and squeeze up his starveling person.

The Captain positively appeared to be in the hey-day of his glory. His dark hair all stuck out and his whiskers were as bushy as those of a bandit upon the stage or in pictures: his moustachios were glossy with pomatum and tremendously fierce; — and he looked as triumphant, as insolent, and as overbearing as if he were an aristocratic general who had just been cannonading the populace at the command of the Ministry. His face was terribly inflamed—and his nose was as rubicund as if it were cut out of beetroot. His new frock-coat was buttoned up to his throat, as usual: but he now wore long wristbands, as stiff as paste-board, and extending over his knuckles—as if he were resolved to defy the whole world to declare that he did not possess a shirt. His light grey trousers were ornamented with a thick stripe of lace on each leg: and, large as his spurs were wont to be, they were now an inch longer and kicked up a more diabolical rattling than ever.

The man Robin was apparelled in a new suit of black; and he had not only a clean shirt, but also a snow-white cravat. He seemed, however, so little at home in this state of outward renovation, that he was positively more afraid of attracting notice in his new dress than he was in his seedy garb. If he formerly looked like a decayed itinerant preacher, he now resembled a mute attired for a funeral and only wanting the mourning band to his hat.

The room in which we now find these worthies seated, at about one o'clock in the afternoon of that Thursday whereof we are writing, was on the third storey of the *Green Dragon* public-house. The Captain had chosen this apartment because it enabled him to command all the points of Acacia Cottage; and even if a waggon-load of hay should pass along the Knightsbridge Road, he could see over it, and thus was certain of never for an instant losing sight of the premises which he was engaged to watch. The window was kept open during the day; and Robin remained almost incessantly behind the curtain, peeping forth, and with looks sharp as needles fixed on the front of Venetia's charming residence. The Captain was for the most part seated at a table, where he wrote down any particulars which Robin reported to him from his post at the window,—such as the visits paid to Acacia Cottage, the appearance of the visitors, whether they were in carriages or on foot, how long they remained, &c. &c.

But, as we have said, it being now one o'clock, the Captain had rung for lunch; and as the bell was not answered within the space of seven seconds from the moment he pulled the rope, he tore at it again with such violence as to make it continue ringing for upwards of a minute. The landlord—a meek, thin, timid, and obliging man—rushed frantically up stairs: but no sooner did he enter the room than he started back in dismay at the awful appearance of the Captain.

"Thunder and lightning, sirrah!" exclaimed this formidable individual, who had sprung up from his chair in a perfect fury: "what do you mean by keeping a gentleman of my rank—an officer, too, in his Majesty's service—waiting for his luncheon? Do you know, sirrah, that I've a great mind to have you lashed up to the triangle and make my man Robin there lay it on thick with a cat-o'-nine tails upon your bare back?"

"I'm really very sorry, Captain — exceedingly sorry," stammered the landlord, stepping back a pace every time the officer took one forward: "but you must excuse a *leetle* delay, sir."

"Delay, sirrah! I don't know what delay is. Have you got any kidneys?" he demanded sternly.

"Yes, sir—some very nice ones. But I hope that for old acquaintance' sake," added the landlord, with the utmost humility, "you will make allowance for the time required to run up three pair of stairs to answer your bell."

"Allowances, sirrah!" vociferated the Captain: "I know nothing of allowances—except of victuals and drink. Robin, do you know anything of allowances?"

"Nothing," replied the man, with his looks steadfastly fixed upon Acacia Cottage. "Please to write down something."

"Well—what is it?" exclaimed Tash, rushing back to his seat at the table and taking up his pen.

"Beggar-man with matches just stopped under

the windows of the Cottage—Miss Trelawney throws out something to him—think it's a penny—can't be sure—may be a halfpenny——"

"Oh! nonsense—humbug—trash!" cried the Captain, flinging down his pen and starting up again. "I told you before not to descend to such contemptible particulars as those. Neither the Earl nor the baronet wants to know how many beggars call. Have you got any rashers?" demanded the gallant officer, once more turning ferociously round upon the trembling landlord.

"Yes, sir—and beautiful fresh eggs," was the meek response. "Rashers and eggs, sir, for lunch?" he added, in a humble tone of inquiry.

"And kidneys, sirrah" thundered the Captain, with appalling sternness. "Robin, you like kidneys—don't you?"

"Chops," was the laconic answer.

"Well, chops, then, sirrah," exclaimed the Captain, bending the fiercest looks upon the landlord. "And now mark me! The clock has just struck one—and my man Robin has been following Miss Trelawney's carriage up into Piccadilly or somewhere—remained outside the house where she went and stayed for a couple of hours—waited till the carriage came to fetch her again—and then followed her back home. Now, sirrah, having done all this, my man Robin is naturally hungry—very hungry: and when Robin is hungry, it is a sign that I am hungry also—and therefore, the clock having just struck one, if the lunch is not up here by the moment it chimes the quarter past, I'll tear the house down and flay you alive—that's all!"

"Very good, sir," said the landlord, in his usual meek way: and he descended the stairs three at a time, bawling out to his better half below, who superintended the kitchen department, "Kidneys, chops, and rashers with eggs for Captain Tash!—rashers with eggs, chops, and kidneys for Captain Ta—a—sh!"

"I frightened him out of his skin, Robin—didn't I?" observed the gallant gentleman, with a horse laugh, the moment the door had closed behind the retreating landlord.

"Yes—but I don't see the use of it," returned Robin drily. "The man is a good man in his way. He gave us credit when we were hard up. You didn't bully him then. Bread and cheese was good enough for our dinner in those times—and you didn't mind waiting Snooks's convenience till it was got ready. Now you order three dishes for lunch—and won't wait a minute. It isn't consistent."

"Consistent!" echoed the Captain, in a rage. "By jingo, I've a precious great mind to——"

But stopping short, he raised a tankard to his lips and sent about a pint of ale down his throat in less time than he could have counted five. Almost immediately afterwards a dirty slip-shod servant-girl entered the room, saying, "Please, sir, missus told me to come up and tell you as how there's no kinneys in the 'ouse—but there's sassengers, if you like 'em instead."

"No kidneys!" thundered the Captain. "Daggers and bayonets! if you don't go to the butcher's and get some directly, I'll eat *you!*"

The girl, becoming deadly pale even through a thick coating of grime upon her face, shrank back in horror as if she thought that the dreadful man would really carry his awful threats into execution and devour her then and there: but the next moment she burst into tears, which speedily traced several lines down her cheeks, as the rain does on dirty glass, and whimpered out an observation to the effect that "she couldn't make kinneys if so be there was none."

"No more she can," remarked Robin, as he still stood motionless as a statue behind the window-curtain.

"Not make them!" ejaculated the Captain. "Why, I tell you they can make anything in this wonderful metropolis of our's!—sugar out of sand—tea out of sloe-leaves—gin out of vitriol—coffee out of chicory—beef-sausages out of horse-flesh—rabbit-pies out of kittens—and biscuits out of Canada timber. Why the devil, then, shouldn't they make kidneys out of something? Eh, Robin?—eh, girl?—answer me *that.*"

"Order the sausages and let her go," said Robin, curtly. "I like sausages."

"Then be it so—and five minutes to get all ready," exclaimed the Captain.

The girl rushed down stairs, ineffably relieved at having escaped being devoured by the modern ogre who had frightened her so terribly: and whilst the lunch was getting ready, the Captain strutted to and fro in the room with majestic self-importance, his man still retaining his post at the window.

"I dare say you think me severe at times, Robin—very severe towards these people of the *Green Dragon,*" he remarked: "but Snooks is an idle fellow—and his wife and servant are as slow as himself. It does them good to stir them up a little now and then with a few words of gentle castigation or remonstrance. Besides, different circumstances demand different treatment. It was all very well to let Mr. Snooks dawdle about just as he chose when we couldn't pay our bills at his house: but now that I've got gold in my pocket, Robin,"—and the Captain hit himself a tremendous rap upon the upper part of his thigh as he spoke,—"I'll make everybody and everything in the place look alive, to serve me promptly—even to the cursed old sign of the green dragon itself that swings so crazily over the tavern door."

"If we don't mind what we're about, sir," said Robin, deferentially, "we shall become so obnoxious that the landlord will bid us leave his premises: and then how are we to watch Acacia Cottage?"

"The landlord eject us!" roared Tash, in astonishment. "What! eject *me—me,* Captain Rolando Tash! Robin, my dear fellow, don't hint at such a thing again, or you will grieve me sadly: for I shall begin to apprehend that your brain is somewhat affected. Eject *me,* indeed! Thunder and lightning! it would be a hard matter, I can assure you! Eject *me—me,* Captain Rolando Tash! Preposterous—absurd—ridiculous!"

And the gallant officer strutted and swaggered to and fro in the apartment, fuming and chafing as if he were filled with a rage which must boil over and vent itself upon some unfortunate wight, no matter how undeserving the victim might be. But happily the prompt appearance of a tray covered with dishes that sent forth an inviting odour, somewhat mollified the fury of Rolando Tash: and as the meek landlord shuffled about, arranging the table and making everything look as neat and comfortable as he could, the sternness of the Captain's countenance gradually

relaxed, until it was completely lost in a broad expansive smile.

"Snooks!" he exclaimed, dealing the landlord a tremendous slap upon the back: "you are not a bad fellow after all—and as I am getting up in the world, I shall continue to patronise your establishment, and none other."

At this announcement Mr. Snooks appeared particularly uneasy—and, fidgetting about with a knife and fork which he had just placed upon the table, he eyed the Captain askance as if to ascertain the precise humour he was in.

"I beg your pardon, sir—I'm very sorry—very sorry indeed, sir," he stammered forth; "but I really—I mean to say that however gratified and honoured I may be—yet——"

"Yet what?" inquired the Captain with awful calmness.

"Well, sir, I had better come to an explanation with you at once," said the landlord, plucking up a spirit and looking the gallant officer in the face, though prudently taking his stand in such a manner that the table was between them, while he (Mr. Snooks) was nearest the door. "The fact is, sir," he continued, "my missus is a very nervous woman—and my servant-girl is subject to hysterics—and I myself am not over strong in the nerves—and as of course a gentleman like you makes a good deal of noise—I mean to say, that you expect things to be done off-hand——"

"Well, sirrah—proceed," observed the Captain, still with that profound and awe-inspiring calmness which precedes the terrific outburst of the storm.

"And so I was thinking, sir," continued the landlord, not quite comprehending the nature of this lull, and flattering himself that the spirit which he now displayed was actually and positively producing a strong effect upon the Captain,—"I was thinking, sir, that if it was convenient for yourself and Mr. Robin to give me up the rooms in the

course of the afternoon and remove to some other tavern, I should esteem it as a favour—and my missus would be particularly obliged."

"Is that all?" asked the Captain.

"Well, sir, I don't know that I've anything more to say," responded Mr. Snooks: "unless it is that I mean no offence and hope we shall part good friends."

"Then, by the living jingo, you infernal scoundrel, I'll punish you for this!" thundered the Captain: and darting round the table, he caught the landlord by the collar of his coat just as the affrighted wretch was precipitating himself towards the stairs. "Come along, sirrah—come along—and if you make a noise, I'll flay you alive! There, sir—up into that corner—now stand on your head—and, by all the daggers and bayonets in the universe! you shall remain in that posture while I and Robin eat our luncheons."

And suiting the action to the word, the Captain lifted up the unfortunate Mr. Snooks as easily as if he were a child—turned him completely over with his feet up in the air—and then deposited him in that ignominious and painful position in the corner.

As for Robin, he just glanced at what was going on, and then fixed his looks again as intently as ever upon the front of Acacia Cottage, apparently considering his duties in that quarter to be of more consequence than the pranks of his master.

The landlord, who was rapidly growing purple in the face, begged and besought the Captain to forgive him: and after some little parley, during which the wretched Mr. Snooks acknowledged himself to be an insolent rascal and promised never to offend again, the gallant officer vouchsafed to temper his justice with mercy. The result was that the landlord, having made all possible submission, was allowed to resume his natural posture once more; and, slinking from the room, he hastened down stairs to vent his wrath upon his better half at whose instigation he had dared to give his formidable guest the notice to quit.

"Now, Robin," exclaimed the Captain, so soon as the landlord had retired, "let us discuss our luncheon. Here are chops," he observed, lifting one of the meat-covers and flinging it across the room; "here are rashers and eggs," he continued tossing the second meat-cover into another corner; —"and here are sausages," he added, sending the third cover spinning through the open window into the street.

Robin started—looked at his master for an instant—and then turned his eyes upon Acacia Cottage again, without uttering a word.

"Come and have your lunch, I say," cried the Captain.

"You know that I always keep watch while you get your meals," said Robin: "and then you take your turn for a few minutes while I get mine. There's something going on opposite."

"What?" demanded the Captain, as he began a desperate assault upon the viands.

"The servants have been doing out the drawing-room with great care," replied Robin.

"Well, and so they ought since the furniture's good," remarked Tash. "Thunder and lightning! if I had such a house as that, I'd have a whole regiment to polish the chairs and tables every morning. But what else do you observe?"

"Miss Trelawney has just entered the drawing-room—and she is splendidly dressed," answered Robin. "Now she's regarding herself in the mirror——"

"And well she may," exclaimed the Captain: "for she is the sweetest, loveliest woman I ever saw in all my life. Handsome people are naturally fond of looking at themselves in the glass, Robin. I am for one:"—and with this remark, the gallant officer raised a tankard to his lips and drained it at a draught.

"Miss Trelawney has been contemplating herself for more than a minute in that glass," said Robin. "She must be very conceited and vain. Ah! she little thinks that anybody is watching her, and how plain I can see into her drawing-room. Now she studies some attitude or look in front of the glass——"

"Depend upon it there's a visitor expected, Robin," observed the Captain. "But I will enter all these particulars in my memorandum-book presently. Let me see, I am to call on the Earl of Curzon this evening at ten—and on Sir Douglas Huntingdon at eleven. Ah! it was a very odd thing that when you went to the baronet's on Tuesday evening, he should give you just the same instructions that the Earl had given me on the Monday—I mean, to watch all Miss Trelawney's movements as we are doing. I suppose there's a regular dead set made at her by the gay young sparks of the West End. Curzon on Monday—Huntingdon on Tuesday—and then that cowardly scoundrel Malpas last night at Lady Wenlock's—— How I hate that Malpas, Robin!"

"I don't like him neither," observed the man. "Done your lunch?" he inquired, as his master rose and gave the bell a terrific pull.

"Not quite, Robin," answered the Captain, as he resumed his seat. "I merely want another flagon of ale—and some more chops, eggs, and sausages for you—seeing that I have swilled and devoured everything the landlord put upon the table. Now, Mr. Snooks," he exclaimed as this individual made his trembling and timid appearance at the door, "I am not going to scold you—on the contrary, I am well pleased with you, your *missus* as you call her, and your culinary arrangements below. The chops, the rashers, and the sausages were all so good that I have honoured them with the fullest discussion: and therefore for the behoof of my worthy attendant——"

Here Robin gave vent to an ejaculation of surprise, exclaiming, "The Prince Regent's private carriage has just stopped at Miss Trelawney's door!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THURSDAY: OR, THE FOURTH SUITOR.

ROBIN was right: it was indeed the private carriage of the Prince Regent which had just stopped at the door of Acacia Cottage. His Royal Highness descended, and was immediately ushered up into the drawing-room, where Venetia Trelawney, in all the splendour and glory of her charms, rose from the sofa to receive him.

Although the Prince was so polished in manners and Venetia was so lady-like, yet neither one could

restrain or conceal the look of curiosity which they flung upon each other as they thus met. His Royal Highness beheld Miss Trelawney for the first time—and he was dazzled and amazed by her exceeding loveliness, which transcended even the vivid descriptions that had been given of it on the occasion of the banquet at the Marquis of Leveson's house. On the other hand, although Venetia had seen the Prince two or three times at a distance when he was riding in the park, she had never till now beheld him close enough to decide how far he resembled his published portraits. We cannot say that she was not somewhat disappointed, for portraits are nearly always flatterers: but she had the tact to conceal the impression which the princely appearance thus made upon her.

Having besought his Royal Highness to be seated, Miss Trelawney remained standing in pursuance of the established etiquette: but the Prince, with that, off-hand politeness for which he was celebrated, observed with a smile that he could not think of taking a chair until she herself was seated. She accordingly placed herself upon the sofa, while the Regent took an arm-chair at a short distance.

"It would be telling an untruth, Miss Trelawney," said His Royal Highness, at once opening the conversation, "and withholding a compliment which you so pre-eminently merit, were I to allege that it is not a sentiment of curiosity that has induced me to pay you the homage of a call. In plain terms, I had received such exciting accounts of your incomparable beauty, that I was most anxious to have the pleasure of forming the acquaintance of the goddess who graces the metropolis with her presence."

"I had already been assured that your Royal Highness was proficient in the art of flattery," replied Venetia, with a blush and a half-smile: "but I did not anticipate the honour of a personal proof of that accomplishment."

"Since you style it an accomplishment, Miss Trelawney," returned the Prince, "you cannot of course be offended by the mode in which I have addressed you. A goddess must consent to receive the adoration which her beauty inspires."

"Women are such vain and frivolous creatures," rejoined Miss Trelawney,—"or at least they have the reputation of being so,—that were I the first to whom your Royal Highness had ever addressed such honied language, I might be immensely flattered by it. But inasmuch as I am well aware that every beauty about the English court has been honoured with the same approval—perhaps, too, in precisely the same words——"

"Miss Trelawney, you are too severe upon me," interrupted the Prince. "I see that you possess a wit equal to your loveliness——"

"And you, sir, a faculty of heaping compliment upon compliment," responded Venetia, with a smile that displayed her brilliant teeth.

"In praising you, Miss Trelawney," said the Prince, fixing upon her a look of deep meaning, "I only gave an honest expression to my thoughts. Yes—you are so far right—I am indeed an admirer of female beauty. I worship—I adore it. But of all the charms that ever received praises from my lips, your's are indescribably beyond all parallel. We must have you at Court, Miss Trelawney; and if you will permit me to become the means of presenting you to the most distinguished ladies who rule the world of fashion, I shall be delighted to have that honour."

"I am at a loss to conceive how I could so suddenly have won your Royal Highness's favour," observed Venetia, her eyes sparkling with a triumph which it was impossible altogether to subdue: "I—a humble, obscure individual——"

"A lady invested with such peerless charms is neither humble nor obscure," said the Prince Regent, emphatically. "And, moreover, if it were necessary to gild the name of Trelawney by the adventitious aid of a title, have I not the power to do that also?"

"Your Royal Highness is making me the object of an experiment," said Venetia, with a flush upon her cheeks—but not a flush of anger: for a subdued joy shone in her beauteous eyes, and smiles beamed upon her heavenly countenance. "You are endeavouring, sir, to ascertain the extent to which a woman's credulity may reach, through the medium of her vanity: and although I do not profess to be more strongly-minded than the generality of my sex, yet I have the sense to avoid rendering myself contemptible in your eyes."

"Upon my soul, you misinterpret my meaning—you do me wrong, Miss Trelawney!" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "I am serious—and what is more, I am *sincere* in all I say: and if you will permit me at once to consider myself upon a footing of friendship with you, I shall be enabled to speak with less reserve."

"I cannot forget, sir," replied Venetia, "that you are the representative of the Sovereign, and that I, as a dutiful subject, am bound to listen deferentially to all that your Royal Highness may choose to address to me. But I beseech you, sir, not to pay me so ill a compliment—after honouring me with so many flattering ones—as to suppose that I am one of those vain, frivolous, silly creatures whose character is taken as the general type of the sex."

"It is precisely because I *do* regard you as possessing a superior mind, that I crave leave to give utterance to my thoughts without reserve or circumlocution. Grant me this permission, Miss Trelawney," exclaimed the Prince, "and you will at once place me at my ease."

"I am of course prepared to listen to whatsoever your Royal Highness may have to say to me," returned Venetia.

"But shall I incur the chance of offending you?" inquired the Prince.

"Your own excellent notions of the courtesy due to a lady must surely render such a fear on your part, sir, quite unnecessary," observed Miss Trelawney.

"But suppose that I threw myself at your feet, and declared that I loved you?" said the Prince, eagerly and anxiously watching the effect of his words.

"I should consider that you were carrying your present jocular humour to a foolish extreme," answered Venetia, laughing.

"But if it were really true, Miss Trelawney—if it were with positive sincerity that I could thus sink on my knees in your presence and offer you the homage of my heart,—what treatment might I anticipate at you hands?" demanded the Prince, with fervid tone and impassioned looks.

"I know not how to respond to such strange

questions," replied Venetia, averting her blushing, glowing countenance, while the slow but deep heaving of her superbly-developed bust evinced the agitation which prevailed within that bosom of incomparable grandeur.

"Ah! dear lady," exclaimed the Prince, drawing his chair closer towards her, "you will not be cruel towards me—I am certain you will not! Were I a humble individual, I should not have dared thus to address you so hastily—so precipitately—within the first few minutes of our acquaintance. But you are well aware that I am an exceptional being—not having the leisure for all those protracted assiduities and that lengthened courtship, so to speak, which under other circumstances would be a duty so cheerfully performed. Now, answer me—and answer me candidly, Venetia: are your affections already engaged?—do you love some happy and enviable young man?—is your heart bestowed upon one whose bride you hope to be?"

"I have had many suitors, sir," was the soft and murmuring reply, as the richly-fringed lids drooped lower upon the melting blue orbs which they now more than half concealed, while the magnificent amplitude of the lady's bosom seemed to swell as if each glowing globe must burst from the corset that imprisoned them.

"You have had many suitors?" echoed the Prince, advancing his chair still nearer to the lovely woman, and speaking in the subdued but tremulous voice of profound passion: "but you do not tell me that any one of them has succeeded in obtaining an avowal from your lips? Then may I not hope—may I not fancy that your heart is indeed disengaged, Venetia—dear Venetia——"

"I have never loved, sir," she observed, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

"Can you love me?—will you love me?" asked the Prince, taking her hand, to withdraw which only a slight attempt was made—and then, feeling that he retained it in his own, she abandoned it to his clasp. "You are aware, Venetia," he continued in that deep voice of masculine harmony which gave such power to his insidious language, "that I dare not speak to you of marriage. But the mistress of a Prince—a Prince Regent, who will some day be a King—is far above the wife of the proudest peer in Christendom. You know that I am speaking the truth, Venetia," he said, his tones becoming more melting—the pressure of his hand more fervid; "and you are too sensible not to be aware that the lady on whom I bestow my love will enjoy all honour, distinction, and respect in the highest circles of fashion. Yes, Venetia—consent to be mine—mine so far as love can render you mine—and I promise you eternal fidelity. I have been deemed fickle and inconstant: but I am not so in reality. The truth is that hitherto where beauty has charmed me at first, vanity and shallow-mindedness have disgusted me afterwards. I have been dazzled by the charms of many women: but few have possessed those mental qualities which fix the impression and render indelible the effect originally produced by the graces of the person. With you it is different. Not only are you as lovely as perfect loveliness can make you,—not only do your external charms excel aught in the form of female beauty that ever met my eyes before,—but you are endowed with those intellectual attractions that rivet the affection which your charms inspire. Your conversation must ever please—your opinions upon all topics must be valuable—and your temper cannot fail to be endearing, as your wit is calculated to sustain and invigorate the healthy cheerfulness of the soul. You see that I understand your character and your disposition well, Venetia: and if you will permit me to enjoy the disposal of your happiness, depend upon it that I shall ever consult your welfare to the extent of my abilities. Answer me, then, Venetia—answer me, dear girl—and tell me whether you will consent to be mine upon these terms?"

While the Prince Regent was thus speaking, the colour went and came upon Venetia's damask countenance: but every time the warm blood rushed back to those cheeks so soft and yet so firm, they glowed with a deepening dye. And the superb bosom rose and sank with quicker heavings—while her rich red lips remained apart, as i breathing the mute sweets to which her tongue refused verbal utterance: so that nothing could exceed the charm of this soft languor and subdued voluptuousness of beauty.

"Venetia, did you hear me?—will you be mine?" asked the Prince, gently moving from the chair to the sofa, on which he placed himself by her side, still retaining her soft plump hand in his own—that hand which trembled as he pressed it!

"But if I were to answer you in the affirmative," she said, in a soft billing tone, as she hung down her head so as to conceal her countenance from the looks which she *felt* as it were to be fixed upon her with all the ardour of passion,—"would you not think the worse of me for being so hasty—so precipitate——"

"Not more than you must think so of me," returned the Prince, already foreseeing that his triumph was assured: and he gently passed his left arm round her waist, while his right hand still retained her own. "Tell me, then, dear Venetia—keep me not in suspense——will you be mine?"

"I will," she answered, in a voice that was not louder than the whispering zephyr: "I will be thine—thine!"

"Dearest, dearest Venetia!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, now seizing her as it were with all the devouring avidity of passion and straining her in his arms.

He pressed his lips to her's and drank in the fragrance of her breath. Never, Oh! never to him, experienced in all sensuous delights though he were, had woman's lips appeared so sweet—so ripe—so luscious, with their dewy moisture! Then he imprinted a thousand kisses upon her cheeks and her forehead—and then his caresses recurred to those delicious lips again! Thence they wandered to the sloping shoulders, so white—so plump—so warm; and her luxuriant hair felt soft as velvet against his cheek. His passion became almost ungovernable: it appeared a dream—a veritable dream that he could so soon have reached the threshold of paradise,—he who had entered that room but an hour previously as a stranger, save by name, to its charming inmate! But it was assuredly no dream as his lips wandered kissingly from that luscious mouth to those damask, glowing cheeks,—from those cheeks where the blood mantled hotly, to the shoulders whose polished surface was catching the crimson tinge,—and thence back

again to the mouth where the choicest of all earthly sweets were to be culled.

But, maddened with desire, the Prince pressed the glowing bosom that swelled yet more exuberantly to the contact of his daring hand: yet when he sought to invade its treasures more boldly and completely still, and when he essayed to profit by the yielding weakness and melting tenderness of the agitated, trembling, almost helpless Venetia,—when, in fine, he endeavoured to overcome the last obstacles that lay between himself and complete happiness,—he was suddenly disappointed and baffled by the force with which she started and disengaged herself from his arms.

Then retreating to the end of the sofa, and half turning her back towards him, Venetia arranged her hair and disordered dress in profound silence: but the rapid heavings of her bosom showed how deeply she was agitated.

"Are you angry with me, beloved Venetia?" inquired the Prince, in a low and tender voice.

"Oh! no—no," she exclaimed, suddenly turning towards him: then, fixing her beauteous blue eyes upon his countenance, and taking his hand of her own accord, she said, "In becoming your's, I make a certain sacrifice—and before I surrender myself entirely up to you, I must enter into a few words of explanation for my own sake. For it cannot do otherwise than seem strange that I should accept your overtures all in a moment and consent without reflection to become your mistress. Were I to tell you that the instant you entered this house, you inspired me with a love which proved stronger than myself, you would not believe me. No—you could not and you ought not to put faith in such a tale, were I weak or deceptive enough to tell it. Then how can you account for the readiness with which I have entered into this compact with you? You must either believe me to be grandly ambitious, or a profligate wanton. But as there is a heaven above us, I am not the latter. My lips were virgin of man's kisses until you pressed them just now: and never until this hour did the blush of shame glow upon my cheeks. It is, then, that I am ambitious—that, as you yourself have expressed it, I would sooner be the mistress of a Prince who is almost a King, than the wife of the proudest peer in Great Britain. Such is the feeling—such the sentiment which has inspired me upon the present occasion. Give me a lofty position, sir—and I will be to you the most faithful, the most affectionate, the most devoted of women. But I require a title to embellish my name—riches to support that title—and all the distinction which can possibly be paid to your acknowledged mistress. Pardon me for mentioning a name which may haply recall unpleasant recollections to your mind—but Mrs. Fitzherbert was your acknowledged mistress, and she was surrounded by veneration, respect, and honour. It is to such a position that I wish to be elevated. Consent to my demands, and I am your's—only your's—unalterably your's: refuse me, or even hesitate to comply—and our connexion ends as it began—within the hour that is now passing!"

"Venetia," answered the Prince, who had ample leisure during this long and seriously-delivered speech to reflect upon all the statements it made and the stipulations it contained,—"I will deal as frankly with you as you have done with me. You spoke of the position of Mrs. Fitzherbert—and you expressed a desire to assume a similar one. But remember that at the time Mrs. Fitzherbert was living openly with me at Carlton House, I was as yet unmarried; and a certain gloss was thrown over our connexion by the rumour that we were privately united in the bonds of matrimony. Circumstances are now altered. I am married—and no such shadow of an apology could be found for any new connexion which I may form. Moreover, although separated from my wife—and having no reason to respect, much less love that miserable woman,"—and the Prince spoke with a virulent acerbity of manner,—"yet I dare not so far outrage all decency as to live openly once more with a mistress at Carlton House. Were you married, Venetia, it would be a different thing. I could appoint your husband to an office in my household; and by virtue of that office he would have his suite of apartments at Carlton Palace, where you might dwell with him, without exciting the outcry of scandal. At all events, under such circumstances public opinion could be easily defied. But you are unmarried——"

"Should you love me the less if I were married?" asked Venetia, hastily: and she gazed upon him with tender earnestness.

"Love you the less, dearest!" exclaimed the Prince. "No—that were impossible!"—and he threw his arms about her neck.

"Let us converse seriously," she said, gently disengaging herself from his embrace. "Would you like me to be married?"

"Yes—if the husband were complaisant and closed his eyes upon our amours," returned the Prince. "But such husbands are not always to be found—at least not in a hurry. You cannot pick and choose them very easily."

"I will be married in less than a week, sir," exclaimed Miss Trelawney: "and to such a husband as you have described."

"What! you have already one in reserve, my darling?" cried the Prince Regent, with a smile. "But are you serious, Venetia?"

"Never was I more so," she answered. "If you give your consent to the arrangement, I promise you to carry it into effect. And for more reasons than one should I rejoice at it," she continued in a tone of deep deliberation and pensiveness: "for it would save my reputation—it would spare my relatives a pang, if they ever learnt——But enough of that!" she cried, suddenly checking herself and dashing away a tear that had started forth upon her long lashes. "Do you, I ask, consent to the arrangement that has been suggested?"

"I prefer it to any other," responded the Prince: "the more so, because as you stipulated for a title of nobility, I can devise or find out some feasible ground for conferring a peerage upon the husband whom you may choose—whereas a title conferred upon yourself, as a single woman, would at once stamp you as my mistress and provoke a murmur throughout the country. Not that I care much for the opinion or the hostility of the people: the cannon, thank God! will always put down discontent—and the British Government has never yet been at a loss for faithful generals who would as soon mow down a mob as receive their pension for doing it. I say, then, my charming Venetia, that I approve of your arrangement—and thus do I again ratify our bar-

gain," he added, seizing her in his arms and once more gluing his lips to her luscious mouth.

She embraced him with reciprocal fervour, lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses and breathing sweet words in his ear. But when he again sought to crown his happiness, she gently repulsed him,—with mingled smiles, however, and blushes.

"Ah! Venetia, you are cruel—too cruel thus to tantalize me!" murmured the Prince. "When will you be mine? Must I be kept in suspense until after the marriage which you are about to accomplish?—or may I hope that this evening—or to-morrow evening——"

"To-morrow evening we will meet," whispered Venetia, bending down her blushing countenance. "But it can not be here: my reputation must not be damaged—perhaps wrecked—previously to this marriage which is to save it——"

"Then you will meet me elsewhere, my love?" said the enraptured Prince, seizing her hand and conveying it to his lips.

"Wherever you may choose to appoint," was the murmuring reply. "I will manage to be there without exciting suspicion at home. But I cannot use my own carriage for the purpose——"

"Mine shall be waiting for you at any hour and place you may name," said the Prince.

"To-morrow evening—at nine o'clock—and at Hyde Park corner," answered Venetia. "I shall be muffled up in cloak and veil——"

"And the carriage shall bring you to the private entrance of Carlton House," added the Prince. "Till then, my adored Venetia, farewell!"

Another fervid embrace—and they separated.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DELICATE COMPACT.

It was not until the Prince Regent was some distance from Acacia Cottage, that he recollected his delicate compact with the Marquis of Leveson. He had set out to visit Miss Trelawney with the firm intention of adhering to that compact: he had even entered her presence in the same mood—for his mind was still occupied mainly with the image of the lady in the gossamer dress. But the moment he stood in Venetia's presence, that image melted from his memory as an effigy of snow would dissolve beneath the rays of a scorching sun. Much as he had heard in praise of Miss Trelawney's beauty, he was taken by surprise with the mingled grandeur, witchery, and splendour of that loveliness which so far exceeded all the ideas he had pictured to himself upon the subject.

He went, therefore, in order to intrigue and to conquer for the behoof of the Marquis of Leveson: but, as the reader has seen, his tactics were all in a moment turned into another channel—and he both intrigued and conquered for himself. The beauty of Venetia instantaneously inspired him with a sentiment which obliterated the image of the gossamer lady as totally for the time being as if it had never had a seat in his soul: he heard Venetia speak — and the music of her voice touched chords in his heart that had not thus vibrated for years before. The richness of her form was precisely that which best suited the taste of the Prince: her auburn hair, crowning her head as with a glory, denoted the fervid temperament that he so much loved to meet in woman. Then the conversation of Venetia had delighted him: her readiness at repartee, without the faintest flippancy—her well chosen language—her logical mode of expressing her thoughts—and her skill in baffling the assaults of flattery until she chose gradually to yield, and ultimately to surrender to the overtures made her,—all this had invested the interview with a peculiar charm the influence of which sank deep into his mind.

Throughout that interview, therefore, he had never once thought of the lady in the gossamer dress—never once thought, either, of his delicate compact with the Marquis of Leveson. When the interview was over, and all was settled between himself and Venetia in a manner that filled his soul with raptures, he had returned to his carriage to give way to the delicious reflections and still more elysian hopes that resulted from his visit. But as the carriage was rattling along Piccadilly and drawing near the corner of Albemarle Street, the Prince Regent suddenly recollected his bargain with the Marquis of Leveson.

The thought troubled him sorely. He had undertaken to abandon to the Marquis all his chances of success with Venetia Trelawney: he had solemnly and sacredly pledged himself to communicate to his lordship everything that passed between himself and that lady. What was he to do?—how was he to act? To resign his claim to Venetia was now almost the same as to ask him to resign his claim to the British throne. He was mad with love—that is to say, the sensuous passion which was all he ever knew in the guise of that sentiment. The lady in the gossamer dress might be hanged, drawn, and quartered now, for anything he cared: he would not give one fig while Venetia's image was yet uppermost in his mind and the pressure of her lips was still felt as it were upon his own,—no, he would not give one fig for all the gossamer ladies in the world.

But how was he to manage with the Marquis of Leveson? It would be impossible to keep his approaching connexion with Venetia Trelawney altogether secret from that nobleman: and he dared not risk a quarrel with one who was so deeply in his confidence, especially with regard to the atrocious conspiracy that was in progress respecting the Princess of Wales. The best thing he could do under the circumstances—in fact, the only thing—was to call at once upon the Marquis, tell him all, and pursuade him to grant a release in respect to the compact so hurriedly and rashly made on the preceding Monday night.

Pulling the check-string, his Royal Highness commanded the coachman to drive to Lord Leveson's in Albemarle Street; and in a few minutes he descended at that noble's palatial dwelling. The Marquis was at home; and the instant the Prince Regent was announced, his lordship of course attributed the visit to an honourable intention on the part of his Royal Highness of fulfilling the bargain made relative to Venetia.

The moment the footman had retired after ushering the Prince to the drawing-room where the Marquis of Leveson received his royal visitor, the latter exclaimed, "My dear friend, a thought struck me as I was coming along—and to that thought must I first give utterance before we speak upon any other subject."

"I am all attention," said the Marquis. "Pray proceed, sir."

"You know that the death of the Duke of Stockport has left a vacancy in the Order of the Garter," continued the Prince: "and I was thinking that perhaps you would like to have it."

"My dear Prince," exclaimed the sexagenarian nobleman, bounding from his seat and snatching hold of the Regent's hand, "this is indeed kind—most kind on your part! It is the height of my ambition—save and excepting the dukedom which you have promised me whenever our views relative to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales shall have been carried out. But in the meantime the Garter—yes, the Garter is the very thing!" ejaculated the old nobleman, as pleased at the prospect of possessing the trumpery bauble as a child on being promised a new toy.

"Well, my dear Leveson," said the Prince, inwardly chuckling at the triumphant success of his stratagem to propitiate the Marquis beforehand, "you shall have the Garter—that is a bargain. I will speak to Ministers about it to-morrow. You have always voted with them—you have been a staunch friend to their policy—and no voice has been raised louder or oftener than your's in the Upper House, in favour of Church and State. They cannot therefore quarrel with the choice I have made for the vacant Garter. If they do, I'll find a pretext to dismiss them all at once—damn them, I will!" ejaculated the Prince Regent, with the emphasis which he was wont to bestow upon an oath.

"Again do I thank you most sincerely, sir," rejoined the Marquis of Leveson: then, resuming his seat, he said, "And now what about our charming Venetia? It is your day for commencing the siege—and I suppose your Royal Highness has been with the mysterious angel?"

"I had not quite finished my observations relative to the affair of the Garter—or I should say, relative to something connected therewith," continued the Prince, dexterously evading an immediate reply to Lord Leveson's query respecting Venetia. "I was about to remark that inasmuch as the Garter is a boon which, when bestowed upon you, will excite the envy and jealousy of all other claimants, I shall have to encounter no small degree of odium with those persons. I therefore think that, in doing all this for you, Leveson, I have a right to solicit a favour in return. In fact, you *can* do me a service—a great service—if you will."

"Then most assuredly I shall have infinite pleasure in doing it," was the prompt reply of the Marquis of Leveson. "Name it, sir—name it——"

"But will you faithfully promise?" demanded the Prince.

"Faithfully—solemnly," returned the nobleman, perfectly convinced in his own mind that his royal friend was about to stipulate for a sum of money in recompense for the bestowal of the vacant Garter.

"Well—we will talk more on the subject presently," said the Prince Regent. "Let us now speak of Miss Trelawney."

"Aye—let us speak as soon as you like, sir, of Miss Trelawney," cried the Marquis, rubbing his hands with a sort of nervous glee: for he entertained no doubt but that the Prince had succeeded in making a conquest in that quarter—a conquest by which he himself hoped to profit, according to agreement.

"I have just come from Acacia Cottage," resumed the Prince, "where I passed an hour. Venetia is certainly very beautiful—very beautiful. Her charms have not been exaggerated. In fact, it would be impossible to exaggerate them ——"

"Ahem!" said the Marquis, beginning to sit somewhat uneasily on his chair. "Your Royal Highness appears to have been a trifle smitten?"

"No man can gaze upon Venetia Trelawney with utter impunity, Leveson," returned the Regent. "We had a long conversation together, of course: and I must candidly confess that I succeeded, after some trouble, in inducing her to listen to my proposals. The cunning puss! she has her little ambition ——"

"Aye—and you pandered to it, sir?" exclaimed the Marquis, nervously and anxiously. "She could not have had a better tactician to deal with. But pray tell me all!"

"I will—honourably and faithfully, according to promise," said the Prince.

"I knew you would, sir—I knew you would!" exclaimed the nobleman, rubbing his hands with a revival of cheering hope as he beheld this apparently straightforward disposition on the part of the Prince to realize his portion of the compact.

"Well," said his Royal Highness, "after a great deal of conversation we came to an understanding—and Venetia assented to my overtures. In plain terms, she agreed to become my mistress."

"Capital!—excellent!" cried Leveson, bounding upon his chair, and grinning like an ancient goat. "Well, sir, what next? I am on the tenter-hooks of expectation. Have you made some appointment with her?"

"I have. To-morrow evening, at nine o'clock," continued the Prince, "I am to send a plain carriage to Hyde Park corner, where she will be muffled up in veil and cloak ——"

"And then you will order your coachman to bring her to my house—eh, sir?" cried the Marquis. "Is that your plan—that your object?" he demanded, with all the petulance of acute suspense.

"To be sure, if you wish it," returned the Prince: then, in a hurried manner, he observed, "But by the bye, I forgot to name the little favour I require at your hands, in reward for the vacant Garter, the investiture of which shall take place early next week."

"Oh! name the service you require, sir," exclaimed the Marquis: "I am all anxiety to continue the discourse relative to my charming Venetia—the angel who shall and must be mine after all ——"

"It is precisely with reference to Venetia that I propose to ask you a favour," said the Regent, taking a pinch of his own artistically confectioned mixture from a gold snuff-box set with brilliants.

"Your Royal Highness surely does not mean to fly from your bargain?" exclaimed Leveson, contemplating the Regent with all the agonies of a torturing suspense.

"Have I conducted myself like a man who intends basely and dishonourably to violate his engagement?" demanded the Prince. "I have described to you with exactitude all that took place between Miss Venetia Trelawney and myself—I

have told you that she consented to become my mistress—and I have put you in possession of the arrangements for the meeting of to-morrow night. Thus far I have fulfilled my compact. But you must permit me to add that *you*, Leveson, never can hope to triumph over Venetia by means of stratagem or artifice: she will prove far too cunning for you—and as for violence and outrage, that of course is out of the question. You would not dare attempt such a proceeding, even if you were strong as Hercules and she weak as a lamb. Now, then, my dear Leveson, seeing that you have not the ghost of a chance in that quarter, I ask you to release me from my compact with you—the only boon that I solicit in return for the vacant Garter——"

"Then do you abandon all farther designs upon the lady in the gossamer dress?" exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, not looking over well pleased at the proposal, and yet scarcely seeing how to refuse it, especially as the Garter itself might haply be at stake: for he knew what a slippery customer he had to deal with.

"I most assuredly abandon all farther views in that quarter, my dear Leveson," answered the Prince; "and, by the bye, I think that if you succeed in discovering the gossamer lady, you may very well manage to console yourself with her for the loss of Venetia. Next to Miss Trelawney, she is decidedly the most splendid creature I ever encountered."

"Your Royal Highness is certainly a good judge," remarked Leveson, with the least accent of bitterness and sarcasm in his tone. "But if you will send me in the course of the afternoon a letter promising the Order of the Garter, in all due form and with your royal seal, I have no farther hesitation in saying that I release you from the compact relative to Venetia Trelawney."

"It shall be done, Leveson," replied the Prince.

"And your Royal Highness abandons all farther design upon the gossamer lady?" continued the Marquis.

"Most assuredly," was the ready response. "Ferret her out—make her your own—she is worthy of all the trouble or expense you may bestow upon the search after her. But perhaps you have already obtained a clue——"

"No, sir—not at present. I have, however, an active agent at work—and he will not let the grass grow under his feet. Neither is he the man to be baffled or disheartened," added the noble lord, emphatically.

"But when you *do* succeed in this search, Leveson," observed the Prince of Wales, "you will let me know what could be the meaning of all that mystery on Monday night, and what sort of a document it really was that I signed so rashly?"

"Whatever information I may succeed in obtaining upon those points, sir," returned Leveson, "shall be duly imparted to your Royal Highness. And now, sir, you will permit me to order up luncheon."

"No, my dear friend," interrupted the Prince, rising. "I must return to Carlton House. The Minister is to be with me at five punctually. There are numerous papers to sign—amongst them several death-warrants——By the bye, I could not help laughing at a paragraph which has recently gone the round of all the newspapers, and which shows how the wretched lickspittles of English journalists endeavour to prove their servile devotion to the Court. It is all pleasant enough to have the gentlemen of the press, as they call themselves, thus licking one's feet: but I cannot the less despise and contemn them for their miserable grovelling character and disgustingly sycophantic dispositions."

"But what is this paragraph to which your Royal Highness alludes?" inquired the Marquis.

"It was one which stated, in the most nauseating terms of flattery, that I experienced a horror and aversion at signing death-warrants," said the Prince. "Now the fact is, I don't think the laws are half severe enough. The lower orders are dreadfully discontented—a parcel of seditious scoundrels that were born to be the slaves of us princes and nobles! How I detest them, the unwashed ruffians!—and so far from having any remorse at signing death-warrants, I should like to see more of the wretches tucked up."

"Yes—I think that the severest examples are required, sir," observed the Marquis of Leveson. "The lower orders are beginning to think for themselves——"

"And they have no business to do so," exclaimed the Prince Regent, stamping his foot upon the carpet. "But I tell you what, Leveson—if there's any more sedition in the country, the government spies and agents shall urge on the mobs to violence—and then we'll have a good massacre. A wholesale massacre will strike terror into the hearts of the people. Why, what with the writings of Tom Paine and other scoundrels of the revolutionary class, the lower orders are actually becoming quite opiniated. Enlightened, by God! I'll enlighten them shortly, if they don't mind: but it shall be with the gleam of bayonets, the flash of sabres, and the blaze of artillery."

"Yes, sir—I agree with you," said the Marquis of Leveson, as coolly and deliberately as if he were discussing the most ordinary topic of the day. "Ministers will be much to blame if they don't get up a massacre shortly. But, by the bye," exclaimed the nobleman, as the thought struck him, "is not this a provoking affair about young Mary Owen? I sent you a note last evening with the particulars——"

"Well, it is somewhat annoying," said the Prince: "but it can't be helped. She will no doubt return home again to her mother in a day or two. At all events, as she promises in her note that she will not betray her parent or her sisters, I think that she is to be relied upon in that respect. She loves them too well to do them an injury. But even if she were to reveal what she knows to any stranger into whose hands she may fall, she would not be believed: or if believed, no one would dare to give publicity to such circumstances. Thank God! we've a good law of libel and the most complaisant, willing, accommodating juries in this country. Besides, there's such a thing as suspending the Habeas Corpus Act and sending all ruffianly libellers and scandal-mongers out of the land, or else locking them up secure in gaol. Everything considered, therefore, I see nothing to apprehend and little to fret about in Mary Owen's conduct. Indeed being so timorous and full of nice scruples, it is much better that she should have withdrawn from an affair which she would only have compromised by her namby-pamby nonsense and maudlin sen-

timentalism. I always thought she was different from her three sisters——"

"Yes," observed the Marquis. "As you are well aware I had signalled her out as one worthy the trouble of a conquest: but if ever I ventured too far in my caresses, she invariably repulsed and baffled me. But I do not think it was so with her three sisters?" added the nobleman as he glanced significantly at the Prince.

"I can answer for Agatha, that she was no prude," returned his Royal Highness, with a smile of similar meaning. "She surrendered herself without much reluctance to my arms: and I believe that my two brothers experienced no more difficulty in overcoming the scruples of Emma and Julia. It is fortunate enough that neither of the three has proved in the family way——"

"I would not have had it happen for the world," exclaimed the Marquis. "Mrs. Owen positively and expressly stipulated all along that while her daughters were being inured to the delicate and exquisite refinements of demoralization, their virtue should be respected."

"I am aware of her stipulations on that point," said the Prince. "But she must have been mad to suppose that all four of her daughters could enter the lion's den and come out unscathed, not one of them to receive a single scratch! However, it is astonishing how blind and credulous in some respects are even the most astute, cunning, and crafty of women."

"But Mrs. Owen, though a thorough woman of the world, knows little of the depths and intricacies of the human heart," observed Lord Leveson.

"That is perfectly true," exclaimed the Prince: "and she no doubt hugs the belief that her three eldest daughters are as pure and chaste, so far as what is called their virtue is concerned, as on the day of their birth."

"No doubt of it," replied the Marquis.

"I believe Mrs. Owen was never married?" said the Prince, inquiringly.

"Never," responded Lord Leveson. "But are you not acquainted with her early history, and that of her sisters?"

"Not entirely, I think," answered the Regent. "You have often been going to tell me: but something has always occurred to interrupt the narrative, even when you commenced it."

"Oh! it may be summed up in a few words," said the Marquis. "There were four sisters of the name of Halkin: the eldest was called Lydia, the second Anne, the third Melissa, and the fourth Lilian They were left orphans at an early age—with a very moderate income for their joint support—and they lived somewhere in the neighbourhood of Rochester, I believe. The eldest, Lydia Halkin, is reported to have been a virtuous woman: but she was the plainest of them all, the other three being remarkable for their beauty. Anne, the second sister, became the mistress of my cousin, Mr. Owen, to whom she was faithful enough, I fancy. The offspring of their amours was the four girls: and Mr. Owen died when they were young, leaving Anne but indifferently provided for. She was a woman of the world; and I helped her to take the handsome house where she has so long resided at Richmond. An intimacy which she formed with a Bishop, and which was of course conducted with the utmost secrecy and circumspection, kept her afloat in a pecuniary point of view; and when the Bishop died, he left her a little money. So much for Anne, the second of the four Halkin sisters. By the bye, it is somewhat odd that she who belonged to a family of four sisters, should herself have four daughters."

"Well, proceed," said the Prince. "What became of the other Miss Halkins?"

"The third, Melissa Halkin," continued the Marquis, "formed an intimacy with that Sir Archibald Malvern who disappeared in so strange and mysterious a manner three or four months ago——"

"What! has he never been heard of since?" exclaimed the Regent. "I knew him—he was a good fellow——"

"He has never been heard of for the last three or four months, I can assure your Royal Highness," said the Marquis. "His son Valentine, whom I saw a few days ago, is still overwhelmed with grief and uncertainty relative to his father: and although Lawrence Sampson, the Bow Street officer, has been employed to unravel the mystery, no clue has been obtained to Sir Archibald's fate. But as I was telling you, sir, Melissa Halkin, the third sister, became the mistress of Sir Archibald when he was quite a young man: and there were children issuing from the connexion, I believe—but I am not sure. Mrs. Owen does not like to talk of Melissa, who died early and under painful circumstances. But I know not what they were. The fourth sister, Lilian Halkin, became the mistress of a young clergyman whose name I never heard—or if I did hear it, I have forgotten it. One thing is however certain, that she was involved in some trouble relative to the sudden and mysterious death of her illegitimate child by this clergyman: and I think she was even committed to gaol and tried for the murder—but I am not sure. Neither do I know what has become of her, nor whether she is alive or dead. I believe that Mrs. Owen is equally ignorant on the point—for she and Lilian were never on good terms with each other. Melissa was Mrs. Owen's favourite sister——"

"Well—but what became of the eldest Miss Halkin—the virtuous one, as you called her?" inquired the Prince of Wales, considerably interested in the narrative of the four sisters.

"I cannot say. Mrs. Owen herself is completely ignorant upon this point. Years and years have passed," continued Lord Leveson, "since she heard anything of her eldest sister, whom she therefore believes to have been long since dead. And now, sir, you are acquainted with as much as I myself have ever learnt relative to the Halkin family."

"It is a strange narrative," said the Prince. "But I must now take my leave of you Leveson. By the bye, to-morrow is your day for waging the warfare of love in respect to Venetia——"

"But I shall of course abandon my turn," remarked the nobleman, with a slight embarrassment of look and hesitation of manner,—"after the explanations which have taken place between us."

"That is precisely the course which I expected you to adopt," said the Prince of Wales, who did not notice the singularity of mien on the part of Leveson.

His Royal Highness then took his leave; and the Marquis remained alone to ruminate upon the disappointment which he seemed destined to experience with regard to Venetia Trelawney.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MEETING AND THE SECOND SEPARATION.

It was a little past nine in the evening; and the beautiful Louisa Stanley was seated by the bed-side of her afflicted aunt, who was sleeping profoundly. Lights were burning upon the table near the couch; and Louisa held a book in her hand — but her thoughts were fixed upon Jocelyn.

It was Tuesday morning that he had left Canterbury—and he had promised Louisa that his absence would not probably be more than three days: at all events he had expressed his certainty that it would not extend beyond a week. This was only Thursday evening—and she was wondering whether he would return next day, or whether the morning's post would bring her a letter announcing the exact period when she might expect him.

In the middle of her reflections the sounds of an approaching vehicle met her ears; and as she listened with a sort of presentient eagerness and hope, she heard the chaise drive up to the garden gate.

"It is he!" she exclaimed, flinging down the volume: then, with a glance at her relative to assure herself that the afflicted lady still slept, the young maiden hurried from the room.

The servant girl who had likewise heard the chaise drive up, was already hastening to open the gate;—but Louisa sped past her—and in a few moments the affectionate being was clasped in the arms of her lover.

"Dearest, dearest Louisa!" exclaimed Jocelyn, as he pressed her to his bosom.

"You are returned safe, heaven be thanked!" murmured Louisa, her gentle heart fluttering with ineffable emotions of chastest, purest joy.

"But I am not alone, dear girl," said Loftus, when the first ebullition of transport had somewhat subsided. "I have brought with me a young lady on whom you must bestow the kind regard and compassionate sympathy which your generous disposition will not refuse when you are acquainted with her sad history."

The noblest mind and the purest affection are too often prone to be susceptible of jealousy: but Louisa Stanley was an exception to the general rule. She was too innocent—too artless—too unsophisticated to dream of the possibility of Jocelyn loving another: she judged him by herself—and she erred not in so doing—for he was in every way deserving of her confidence.

Therefore, when she beheld Mary Owen and heard the manner in which her lover introduced the unhappy young lady to her notice and recommended her to her sympathies, Louisa at once and unhesitatingly proffered her hand, saying, "You are welcome to my humble abode."

The kindness of tone in which these words were uttered and the endearing gentleness of Louisa's manner, instantaneously touched the most susceptible chords in Miss Owen's heart; and yielding to the impulse of this sudden effusion of feeling, she threw herself into the young maiden's arms and wept upon her bosom as she murmured forth her thanks for the tender welcome just vouchsafed.

The chaise was dismissed — Louisa conducted Jocelyn and Miss Owen into her neat little parlour —and Mary the servant-girl bustled about to spread the table with the contents of her larder. The lamp was lighted—the curtains were drawn over the windows—and an air of comfort pervaded the room. Jocelyn and Louisa exchanged looks of the profoundest, holiest love,—and an affectionate pressure of the hands again conveyed a mutual assurance of the joy which they experienced at thus meeting once more, although their separation had been so short. Even poor Mary Owen began to appear more cheerful, at the spectacle of the innocent happiness and pure delight which she thus witnessed.

After supper, Miss Owen expressed a desire to withdraw to the chamber which had been prepared for her reception,—not only because she was much wearied, but likewise because she knew that Jocelyn and Louisa must naturally have many things to say to each other. And it was so: for on the one hand the young gentleman had to recite the particulars of his interview with Clara, and also to narrate to his well-beloved as much as with propriety and delicacy he could tell of Mary Owen's sad history; while on the other hand, Louisa had to undertake the painful task of describing the outrage which she had experienced on the part of the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

Jocelyn Loftus felt his blood boil with indignation as he heard this narrative; and starting from his seat, he vowed that he would hasten without delay and overwhelm the infamous Bernard Audley with reproaches. But Louisa besought him, with tears in her eyes, to calm himself; and when she placed in his hands the letter written by the lady in black, he yielded to her entreaties that he would take time to deliberate ere adopting any particular course with regard to the Minor Canon. He then expressed his satisfaction that Louisa had thus frankly communicated the particulars of the outrage, instead of withholding them from him, as she might have done through the best of motives: but the young lady declared that she never should retain anything secret from him whom she loved and in whom she placed all her confidence.

Reverting to a more agreeable topic, the lovers again spoke of Clara Stanley. Jocelyn assured Louisa that her sister was in the enjoyment of the best health and was no doubt happy; and he then produced the packet of which he was the bearer. It contained a letter and a complete set of diamonds which Clara stated that the bounty of Mr. and Mrs. Beckford enabled her to send as a gift to her beloved sister. The epistle was a long one, and full of the tenderest assurance of affection and the best possible advice most delicately and feelingly conveyed. Louisa wept over that fond communication from her sister—a communication which she valued ten thousand times more than the splendid present that accompanied it.

The conversation between the lovers now turned upon Mary Owen; and, without alluding to the infamous means which had been adopted to corrupt and demoralize the minds of the four sisters, Jocelyn explained sufficient to render Louisa acquainted not only with Mary's sorrowful position, but also with the atrocious conspiracy that was afoot against the peace, happiness, and honour of the injured Princess of Wales.

Louisa was naturally shocked when she learnt that such cold-blooded and diabolical villany was in the course of perpetration;—and she shed tears at the thought of the position in which the unfortunate wife of the Prince Regent was placed. And while those tears yet glistened upon her long lashes, she exclaimed, "O Jocelyn! surely, surely you will warn the Princess of the terrible dangers which environ her!"

"Ah! my beloved Louisa," he cried, carrying her fair hand to his lips, "I am rejoiced that this suggestion should have emanated from you! You feel for one of your own sex, although personally a stranger to you;—and you would not be happy if you thought that this tremendous secret which has come to our knowledge, were to remain locked up in our own breasts. No—it must be breathed elsewhere—it must be communicated to the Princess herself—and she must be placed upon her guard against the machinations of her enemies. But by the agents and creatures of these enemies is she no doubt already so completely surrounded, that her very letters are liable to interception—the sanctity of any correspondence addressed to her will probably be violated—and it must therefore be by verbal communication and a personal interview that the solemn warning can alone be given to her in safety."

"Oh! my beloved Jocelyn," exclaimed Louisa, the tears streaming down her cheeks, "it is for you to fly and impart that solemn warning to the persecuted Princess Caroline! Even were the adoption of this course to delay our union for many months instead of a few weeks, I am not so selfish as to study my own happiness to the prejudice of an injured, wronged, and outraged woman. It is a Christian duty to warn her of the conspiracy which is multiplying all its dreadful engines of destruction around her."

"Louisa, your conduct on this occasion is most noble—most admirable," exclaimed Jocelyn, as he contemplated the beautiful girl with all the enthu-

siasm of the heart's profoundest devotion. "If anything had been wanting to convince me of the generosity of your nature—the kindness of your disposition—and the delicate tenderness of your feelings, the proof would now be afforded me. With your concurrence, then, my well-beloved, I will to-morrow set off for the Continent:—the Princess is now, I believe, in Italy—but my journey shall be rapid—my mission executed with promptitude—and my return as expeditious as possible."

"Yes—we must consent to separate thus for a short time," said Louisa, as she fell upon Jocelyn's neck and gave free vent to her feelings.

They now separated—the young gentleman taking an affectionate leave of the charming maiden, but with a promise to be at the cottage soon after nine o'clock in the morning. He repaired to the hotel in Canterbury to which the post-chaise had already taken his portmanteau; and retiring to rest, the slumber that visited his eyes was serene and pleasant, not only from the consciousness of duties fulfilled or good intentions planned, but also because the image of his Louisa appeared to visit him in his dreams and shed upon him the holy influence of her sweetest smiles.

On the ensuing morning Jocelyn Loftus rose early: and the Cathedral clock was proclaiming the hour of eight as he knocked at the door of the Minor Canon's residence. To his inquiry whether the Reverend Bernard Audley could be seen so early upon business of importance, the domestic answered in the affirmative; and he was at once conducted into a back parlour where the Canon was seated at breakfast. He started and turned pale on beholding Jocelyn Loftus: but instantly recovering himself, he assumed an air of the blandest courtesy as he requested him to be seated.

Jocelyn bowed with cold hauteur, and remained standing.

"Mr. Audley," he said, in a firm and impressive tone, "the words I have to address to you are few—but I pray that they may receive your earnest attention now and your fullest consideration hereafter. I returned last evening to Canterbury, and learnt with what amount of indignation, abhorrence, and disgust, you may perhaps be able to conceive, the atrocious outrage perpetrated by you against an innocent, gentle, and virtuous young lady. Were you to experience at my hands the treatment you merit, an uncompromising exposure would take place, and the Archbishop would at once be led to deal with you according to your deserts. Or perhaps the civil authorities might be appealed to, and the power of the magistrate be called into requisition to show the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley that neither his patrician connexions nor his holy garb can protect him when he violates the law. But I do not wish to create a scandal upon the present occasion. Several reasons prompt me to deal mercifully with you. The first is an anxiety to spare the already too much outraged feelings of Miss Louisa Stanley the necessity of undergoing any further pain by introducing her into a court of justice. The second is because a lady who is your *victim*,"—and Jocelyn bent his looks significantly upon the Minor Canon, who quailed beneath them,—"has appealed to Miss Louisa Stanley's mercy on your behalf. There are other motives which prompt me to exercise forbearance: but those I have specified are the principal inducements. And now, sir, am I to expect that you will henceforth leave Miss Stanley unmolested, during the short time that she may continue to dwell at her present residence?"

"Mr. Loftus," said the Minor Canon, veiling all the darkest passions of his soul beneath an aspect of assumed humility and contrition,—"I am fully aware that you are treating me more mercifully than I deserve. I shall say nothing about my sorrow—my repentance—for what has passed——"

"Of repentance I do not believe you susceptible, sir," exclaimed Jocelyn, sternly. "God forbid that I should allege without reason that any man's heart is thoroughly hardened: but the conversation which I one evening accidentally overheard in the Cathedral cloisters between yourself and that unfortunate lady——"

"For heaven's sake, allude to it not, Mr. Loftus!" cried the Canon, in a tone of piercing entreaty. "The walls have ears—you may be overheard——"

"Alas! that men, especially the ministers of the Gospel, should be guilty of deeds that bear not mention even in a whisper!" said Jocelyn, with a strong accentuation upon his words. "But I fear, sir, that from the conversation which took place in the cloister, and to which I have referred, your heart is utterly steeled against every principle of honour and integrity—and that it is not accessible to repentance! Nay, more—if the dark allusions and mysterious hints which I then overheard, and which passed between yourself and that unhappy woman who is doubtless the same that rescued Miss Louisa Stanley from your power,—if those allusions, I say, were to be duly weighed and considered, would they not point to some crime whereof you have been guilty?"

"Mr. Loftus, you dare not draw such an inference from the ravings of a mad woman!" exclaimed the Minor Canon, vehemently.

"I do not choose to be uncharitable, sir—nor to suffer even my own secret thoughts to exaggerate the impressions which they receive. But a less cautious person than myself would draw strange and even terrible deductions from the deliberate accusations and measured upbraidings which you now term the ravings of a demented female. No, sir—that lady who is your *victim*, has *not* lost the use of her senses: she possesses them with an acuteness and a keenness that render her wrongs intolerable to think of. However, sir," exclaimed Jocelyn, "I will not dwell upon that subject. My principal aim in visiting you, was to declare that if you should again attempt the slightest molestation towards Miss Louisa Stanley, the authorities shall be appealed to—all I know or suspect concerning you shall be unhesitatingly made public—and, while your gown is torn from your back, your character shall be held up to universal scorn and execration."

Having thus spoken, Jocelyn Loftus bowed coldly and quitted the room, leaving the Minor Canon a prey to all the blackest feelings of rage, hatred, malignity, and vindictiveness that ever boiled like a lava-stream in the heart of man.

It was nine o'clock when Jocelyn reached the cottage, where he was welcomed by his beloved Louisa and Mary Owen. He sate down to break-

fast with them: and afterwards he communicated to the latter young lady his intention of proceeding on the Continent to obtain an interview with the Princess Caroline. He promised, however, to compromise Mary's sisters as little as might be; and to use every endeavour to persuade them to withdraw from the detestable service in which they were engaged. Mary Owen thanked him with tears in her eyes for these assurances on his part; and having bade him farewell, she remained in the parlour while Louisa and himself walked alone together in the garden.

Jocelyn now communicated to his beloved the step which he had taken in respect to the Honourable and Reverend Bernard Audley; and he expressed his conviction that she would receive no farther molestation at the hands of that individual.

The hour for separation now arrived, Jocelyn having ordered a post-chaise to be in readiness for him at the hotel by mid-day. Long and fervid was the parting embrace of the enamoured pair,—deep and earnest the vows which they repeated,—pure and tender the kisses which they exchanged. At length Jocelyn tore himself away from his weeping betrothed: she watched him until he was out of sight;—and then, hurrying to her own chamber, she gave free vent to her tears.

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE READING OF A CHARACTER.

If we look into the comfortable parlour at Mr. Lawrence Sampson's house in Long Acre, at about ten o'clock on this same Friday morning of which we are now writing, we shall again behold the Bow Street officer and his guest, Jack the Foundling, seated in conversation at the breakfast-table,—ample justice having been done to the repast.

"Now, my boy," said Larry Sampson, pouring out a glass of that same rich cordial wherewith he had regaled the youth on the preceding day and which had so much warmed the lad's heart towards him,—"I begin to fancy that I have obtained a full and complete insight into your disposition: and I will tell you exactly what it is, if you will allow me. In plain terms, I will read you your character."

"Do so, Mr. Sampson," observed the Foundling; "since you appear to wish it."

"Yes—I wish it," replied the officer, "because I want to convince you that whatever I may do for you, is done by me with my eyes open, so that you must not fancy you are able to outwit Larry Sampson in the slightest degree."

"I don't exactly understand you, sir," said the Foundling, his face becoming scarlet, as if he now saw that the officer had penetrated into those secret thoughts which he had fondly and vainly fancied to be well concealed in the depths of his soul.

"You need not annoy nor vex yourself with apprehensions concerning what I am about to say," continued Larry. "Rome was not built in a day—and you cannot get rid of evil habits, propensities, and thoughts in twenty-four hours. You have been reared in a school of artifice, duplicity, and deceit: and those tendencies cling to you with the inveteracy of rags upon a beggar. But now drink your cordial—and then listen to me."

"I am all attention, sir," replied the lad, as soon as he had disposed of his liqueur.

"When I proposed yesterday morning, in Fleet Lane, that you should come and pass a day or two with me," resumed Sampson, "Daniel Coffin was evidently well pleased—and he rushed after you, with the pretext of telling you to put on your best clothes. But in reality, when he was alone with you, he enjoined you to fish as much out of Larry Sampson as you possibly could:"—and as the officer thus spoke, he looked the Foundling very hard in the face.

"How do you know that, sir?" inquired the lad, colouring deeply.

"Simply from experience," was the calm response: "and now that tell-tale blush upon your cheeks confirms my suspicion. Well, I knew therefore that I was bringing a spy home to my house: but I did not mind that. I had my intentions concerning you, because I pitied your lot—I also felt interested in your future welfare. You entered my abode with the purpose of making the best of all you might see and hear: but we had not talked long together before you forgot your original aim and grew absorbed in the topics of our discourse. As the day wore on, you felt better and better disposed towards me: and last evening you had become modelled as it were to such an improved state of mind, that you were deeply touched by the pictures which I drew of the advantages of an honest life and a good character. We have now been conversing a couple of hours this morning—and you seem anxious to enter upon a right path if you had the opportunity. Now, is all this true or not?" demanded Sampson, again looking the youth fixedly in the face.

"It is perfectly true, sir," was the response.

"But on the other hand," resumed the officer, there are moments when you think to yourself what a fool you are to give way to anything savouring of contrition for the past; and you feel a certain restlessness and uneasiness which invariably accompany a transition phase in the human mind. Now it will take some time and trouble to redeem you thoroughly: but it would only need the temptation of a moment and but a few words of persuasion on the part of the tempter to drag you back again into the slough of demoralization. You have been so trained in the school of duplicity and deceit, that a purely straight-forward line of conduct would become positively irksome, as it were, for a time. It is the difference between the mind's utter abandonment on the one hand, and a wholesome restraint on the other. But you are not so utterly lost that your redemption is impossible: and that redemption I will take in hand, if you will permit me."

"Ah! sir, how can I refuse such an offer?" exclaimed the Foundling, speaking with an impulse of the fullest sincerity at the moment.

"Then you accept it?" said Larry, inquiringly.

"I do—beyond all chance of recalling my words," responded the youth.

"And you will undergo the exact training which I shall specify?"

"I will follow your commands and instructions in all things."

"Now answer me one more question, boy," said the officer. "Instead of being a thief yourself, would you like to be a thief-catcher?"

"If you had asked me that question the first thing yesterday morning, sir," remarked the lad, "I should have at once said '*No.*' But now—after all you have told me about your own adventures—the advice you have given me—and the interest you have taken in my behalf, I cannot say '*No*' so decisively. And yet I don't exactly like to say '*Yes.*'"

"I am glad you have answered me in that manner," said Larry. "But inveterately addicted to habits of duplicity and trickery as you are, you cannot put them off all in a moment as you would a rusty garment. You must first direct their use, as it were, into a new channel, so that they may gradually take a new form and shape and expand from low cunning into a loftier astuteness. Such a transition may be effected by placing you out of the career of crime as a practitioner, and placing you in its track as a pursuer. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly," was the reply. "And for this reason you wish me to become a thief-taker—a pupil of your own?"

"Such is my wish. If you accept my proposal, you shall live here with me—fare every day as you have already fared beneath my roof—have plenty of pocket-money and leisure for rational amusements—and in time, if you behave well, become a regular established constable of Bow Street. Now, what say you?"

"That I accept your proposal on certain conditions," was the answer.

"Name your terms," said Larry.

"First, that you never ask me to do any harm to Dick and Sally Melmoth, whom I look upon as a brother and sister," observed the Foundling.

"Agreed," exclaimed Larry. "Go on."

"Secondly, that you avail yourself, when you have leisure, of your extraordinary skill and keenness in ferretting out things, to discover who my parents were or are."

"Agreed also," ejaculated the Bow Street officer. "Go on."

"And thirdly, that you never insist upon my doing anything in a direct manner to injure Daniel Coffin; for though he is rough and brutal at times—indeed, very often—yet as I have lived with him so long ——"

"I understand—and I give you credit for the feeling," said Larry. "I therefore promise never to employ you in a direct manner to do anything that may injure Daniel Coffin."

"I have no other conditions to name," observed the Foundling.

"Our bargain is therefore complete," said Larry. "But now I want you to give me a proof of your sincerity by answering me one question—and only one question relative to any past transaction in which I believe you to have been engaged."

"Speak—and you shall see whether I mean to act straightforward, or not," replied Jack the Foundling.

"Tell me, then," said Larry, fixing his eyes with such a peculiar steadfastness and penetration upon the youth that it seemed as if he were determined there should be no escape from the influence of that glance,—"tell me whether you formed one of that party of eight who committed the outrage on the Prince of Wales last Monday night?"

"I was," returned the lad, with a sudden start, the nature of the question being evidently so little anticipated by him. "But is there any disturbance to be made about it?" he inquired anxiously.

"Not at all," answered Larry. "Only I of course know all about it: everything of that kind comes to my ears, either directly or indirectly, as you may readily suppose. It was a curious affair altogether: but I dare say that you yourself do not half comprehend its aim and meaning. One of these days I will tell you all about it ——"

"But was it not, then, for purposes of robbery only?" inquired the lad.

"Not altogether. You and your comrades were detained more than an hour at the house," observed Larry Sampson, carelessly; "and that was a much longer time than was necessary to ease the Prince and the Marquis of their property."

"To be sure!" exclaimed the lad. "I did not think of that before. Besides, when I reflect upon the affair—now that you have given me the hint—it would have been easier to do the robbery at the moment the carriage was stopped in the Kew Road, than take it all the way to Wandsworth for the purpose."

"As a matter of course," observed Sampson. "But I suppose you got something to drink there—you and the other fellows—and so you did not observe how long you were detained at the house."

"Why, to tell you the truth," said the Foundling, "when we had taken the carriage into the gate-way of Beechey Manor, four or five of us went out—put our masks in our pocket—and got some drink at the *Blue Lion* which is only fifty yards off."

"Nothing can be done without drink, it seems," observed Larry, smiling: then, rising from his chair, he observed, "I have some little business to attend to, this forenoon, Jack; and so I must leave you till two or three o'clock. But here's money for you—and I thought that if you liked to go to the Tower and see the wild beasts, or do something to amuse yourself till dinner-time, it would be as well."

"I would rather remain here, with your permission, and look at your books, sir," replied the lad.

"Ah! you mean that as a hint to remind me of the promise I made to show you my private memoranda," exclaimed the officer, laughing: "but I can't look them out for you this morning. To-morrow, perhaps——"

"Pray don't inconvenience yourself, Mr. Sampson," said the Foundling. "I shall find plenty of occupation with the books on the shelf there."

"Be it so," observed the officer. "And if you want anything, Dame Margery will attend to your orders."

Mr. Lawrence Sampson then quitted the room: and proceeding to the private chamber which has already been noticed as his *sanctum*, he remained there for about a quarter of an hour. On issuing forth again, he was clad in a disguise so complete that even his most familiar friends would not have known him: and passing out of the dwelling by a back door opening into a court behind, he pursued his way to the Strand where he entered a hackney-coach, ordering the driver to proceed quick to a locality which he named.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE POSTMAN.

BEECHEY MANOR, in the immediate vicinage of Wandsworth, which is between six and seven miles from the centre of London, was an old building, spacious, and having a gate-way in one of its wings. It stood at a distance of about fifty yards from the main road, and was approached by a shady lane. At the point where the lane thus branched off from the road, stood a small public-house bearing the sign of the *Blue Lion;* and a board, daubed with a ferocious specimen of the cernlean animal, swung crazily and creakingly over the door.

The Manor belonged to a certain General Beechey, whose profligacy and extravagance had compelled him to fly from the country a few months previously to the date of our narrative; and in the interval the house had remained pretty nearly unoccupied, save and except so far as will presently transpire.

It was about half-past twelve o'clock on the Friday of which we are writing, that a postman, duly apparelled in the official costume and carrying a bundle of letters in his hand, entered the *Blue Lion* in that bustling, hurried manner which is wont to characterise individuals in that department of the Government service.

"Glass of ale," he said, with a corresponding rapidity of utterance, to the landlord at the bar: and while the latter was drawing the beer, the postman asked, "Who are the people up at the Manor now?"

"I know nothing more about them than their name," replied the landlord, as he handed the glass of ale.

"And what is their name?" inquired the postman, examining the superscription of a letter with great intentness: "for I'll be hanged if I can make it out with this queer writing."

"Bradshaw—Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw," said the landlord.

"To be sure!—so it is!" ejaculated the postman: then, having tossed off the ale, he observed as he tendered the halfpence in payment, "They haven't been there long—have they?"

"Only a few days—a week or so, as near as I can guess," answered the landlord. "But you are a new man in this letter-delivery district, ain't you?"

"Yes—only put on temporary," was the reply. "That's capital ale of your's. I'll take another glass. One doesn't get such ale as this every day in the week."

"I believe you," exclaimed the landlord, highly flattered by the homage thus done to his liquor: and well he might be, inasmuch as it had far more of the taste of vinegar and the appearance of muddy fluid, than the twang of the hop or the transparency of genuine ale.

"Have you seen these Bradshaws at all?" inquired the postman carelessly, as he sipped the ale. "I think they must be the same that used to live up Islington way, when I was on that beat two or three years ago: and if so, they're capital people. Always came down with a present at Christmas and a drop of something short on a cold night."

"I have seen the gentleman once or twice," answered the landlord. "He's an elderly man—very agreeable to talk to—and loves a drop of good drink. He says my brandy beats the best French he ever tasted."

"Ah! then I suppose he has been in France?" said the postman.

"It appears so from what he tells me. I haven't seen the lady—she doesn't go out much, if at all: her husband told me she wasn't in good health——"

"Do they keep up any establishment at all?" inquired the letter-deliverer.

"No—not a bit," was the reply. "When General Beechey went away some months ago, he left an old man and a woman—that is, the old man's wife—to take care of the place; and they are the only servants now at the Manor. So I suppose that the Bradshaws don't intend to make a long stay of it. Old Tom Underdown—that's the man—comes here of an evening to smoke his pipe and take his pint; and he tells me that Mrs. Bradshaw is a beautiful woman. He doesn't think that she and her husband lead a very pleasant life together: for they're constantly quarrelling."

"Ah! then they are the same Bradshaws of whom I spoke just now," exclaimed the postman, as he paid for his second glass of ale. "Good day, landlord."

And with this hurried farewell, he quitted the *Blue Lion*, proceeding on his way towards the Manor, which he reached in a few minutes.

Instead of going up to the front entrance, he passed into the gateway, and found, as he seemed to have anticipated, that there was a side-door belonging to the house. He gave the usual postman's knock; and after some delay an old woman made her appearance.

"Mr. Bradshaw at home?" inquired the postman.

"No. You can give any letters to me," was the answer.

"I have none for him now," said the postman: "but I want to make an inquiry about a particular letter——"

"Well, I tell you he isn't at home," interrupted the old woman, querulously: and she was about to close the door.

"If Mrs. Bradshaw is at home, she will do as well as her husband," said the postman. "Come—I can't stand here all day—I'm not paid for losing my time——"

"Wait a minute," said the old woman: and she hurried off as quick as she could to deliver the postman's message.

In a short time she re-appeared, requesting this individual to walk in. He accordingly entered the hall, and was conducted by old Mrs. Underdown, as he conjectured the crone to be, up a wide and handsome staircase to a spacious landing. There the woman threw open a door—and the postman was ushered into a large and elegantly-furnished apartment, where a lady of great beauty was seated upon a sofa.

She looked very hard at the postman as he entered the room and made a bow: but speedily resuming an easy manner and indifferent mien, she appeared to wait the explanation of his business.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, for intruding," he said: "but I've got a letter addressed to General Beechey, and it's marked outside that it's to be forwarded to

his address if he isn't at the Manor, as it is very important. Now as I've heard that the General is *not* here——"

"You had better leave it with me, my good man," said the lady: "and I will take care that it shall be forwarded to the General in due course."

"I can't do that, ma'am," was the reply. "The Post Office orders are positive. No offence, ma'am — but the letter mustn't be trusted out of my hands."

"And you say it is marked as very important?" observed the lady, in a musing tone, as if she were deliberating what course she ought to pursue.

"Yes—'*highly important and in haste*,' ma'am," answered the postman, referring to the address of one of the letters which he held in his hand.

"I think I can give you the General's address abroad," said the lady, as a thought seemed to strike her. "At least, I am very much mistaken if it is not in my husband's possession. He is not at home at this moment—but perhaps I shall find it in his writing-desk. Wait a few minutes."

"Certainly, ma'am," said the postman.

The lady accordingly rose and quitted the room.

In about five minutes she returned with a piece of paper in her hand.

"There is the General's address," she said. "It is my husband's own writing, as he himself took it down the last time he saw the General. You may therefore rely upon the address being the accurate one."

"Shall I take a copy of it, ma'am?" inquired the postman: "or may I keep it?"

"You may keep it," responded the lady. "I have already copied it in case my husband should forget it."

"I am very much obliged, ma'am, for the trouble you have taken: and I'm sorry to have intruded upon you so long. Good afternoon, ma'am."

With these words, the postman put the paper into his pocket and retired.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FRIDAY: OR, THE FIFTH SUITOR.

It was nine o'clock in the evening—and a private carriage was waiting at Hyde Park corner. The coachman sate upon his box, ready to impel the spirited steeds forward the instant the expected person should arrive: and the footman stood close by the door, holding the handle ready to open it.

The carriage had no arms upon the panels—and the domestics wore plain great coats over their liveries. The equipage had been waiting there for half-an-hour; but it was not until the clocks were striking nine, that a lady, closely veiled and muffled in a cloak, made her appearance. The door was instantly opened—the fair one stepped in—and the footman whispered, "His Royal Highness desires his compliments, ma'am, and has made arrangements to receive the honour of your visit at the house of a friend."

The door was then closed—the steps put up—and, as the footman leapt up behind the carriage, it drove rapidly away.

"Now," said Venetia Trelawney to herself, as the announcement she had just heard still rang in her ears,—"some treachery is intended—and I think I can fathom it. The Prince has been weak and foolish enough to boast of his triumph and mention our appointment—and the friend to whom he has thus unbosomed himself, is taking advantage of the incident. But I will allow the adventure to take its course."

And throwing herself back in the carriage, Venetia watched from the window the direction it was pursuing.

Along Piccadilly it sped: round the corner into Albemarle Street it turned—and the next moment the equipage dashed up to the front of the Marquis of Leveson's mansion.

"I thought as much," said Venetia to herself: and even in the obscurity of the vehicle, with no one to receive the withering influence of her scorn, did her lips wreathe for a moment into a smile of ineffable contempt.

The footman opened the door of the carriage at the same moment that the portals of the mansion itself were unfolded: and Venetia, still keeping the veil close over her countenance, tripped with graceful lightness into the marble hall. A page in an elegant costume was waiting to conduct her: and she followed him up the handsome, well-lighted staircase into a drawing-room decorated with crimson hangings and furnished in a corresponding style.

The page instantaneously withdrew—and Venetia was alone.

Undismayed by the position in which she found herself, and into which indeed she had allowed herself to be hurried, she tranquilly and deliberately took off her bonnet and veil, and laid aside her cloak. She then appeared in an elegant evening costume of dark velvet, which not only by its make set off her charms to their utmost advantage, but likewise by its hue displayed all the dazzling brilliancy and transparent fairness of her complexion.

Her hair was arranged in massive tresses, which fell upon her shoulders so bright in their alabaster purity, and so plump in their softly rounded fulness. That glorious hair displayed, in the lustre of the lamps that lighted the room, all its richest hues of auburn—shining like gold in some parts, and dark as a glossy velvet in others where the shade remained. The body of her dress was cut exceedingly low, the bosom rising grandly above it rather than being imprisoned within it: and her arms, naked to the very shoulder, displayed the robust symmetry of their rounded proportions.

There was a slight flush upon her cheeks—but not a hectic one: merely a deepening of the natural carnation, and dying away in healthy transition into the purity of the lily. Her eye-lids drooped not now, but were fully raised—and thus the deep blue orbs themselves shone with an expression of firmness and decision instead of looking tender and melting with their wonted languor.

As she sate upon the crimson sofa on which she had thrown herself, the dark velvet dress displayed the fineness of her form, and by its very folds might have assisted the eye to trace the sweeping length of the limbs which the flowing robe in reality concealed. But upon an ottoman rested one beautiful foot—and the skirt of the dress was just raised sufficiently to allow a glimpse of a slender and well-rounded ankle, with its flesh-coloured silken hose and its neatly tied sandal.

The picture was ravishing to a degree—enchant-

ing beyond all power of description. Were Cleopatra such a woman as Venetia Trelawney, it can be no matter of wonder if Mark Anthony could reconcile himself to the loss of the empire of the Roman world for a being so goddess-like as she. Poets may have dreamt of a loveliness without fault—romancists may have laboured to describe a beauty without imperfection—and artists may have transferred to canvass the glowing image of their enraptured conception of woman's charms: but never did bard behold in the most beatific of his visions—never did novelist conjure up in his happiest mood—and never did painter pourtray in the sublimest hours of his genius, a being more transcendently lovely than Venetia Trelawney.

She was one of those women for whose sake the enthusiastic lover would not only dare every peril and encounter every horror that the circumstances of life could possibly afford for such an ordeal; but she was one to win whose smiles and gain whose favours a man might consent to plunge headlong into the abyss of crime. To be allowed to toy with those golden tresses—to pass the hand over that damask cheek—to press the lips to that rich red mouth—to pillow the head upon that heaving bosom—to be clasped in those warm and rounded arms—and to know that all these delights were but the prelude to those elysian joys that would not be refused,—Ah! this indeed were to experience the realization of paradise upon earth!

But to resume our narrative in due course.

Venetia Trelawney had not been many minutes alone in the Crimson Drawing-Room, when she suddenly observed that a door facing where she sate was partially open. She looked round, and at once became satisfied that it was not the door by which she had entered the room; and she was equally certain it was not standing thus half open when she was first introduced into the apartment. What, then, could it mean? Was there some one

in the place with which that door communicated?—and was a tacit invitation thus conveyed for Venetia to enter thither?

She asked herself these questions: but, being unable to solve them even in conjecture, she remained calmly and tranquilly where she was, disdaining to trouble herself or even to gratify her curiosity by approaching that open door.

Ten minutes elapsed—and no one came. She consulted her watch and thus ascertained that the time was passing in this manner. Feeling indignant at being kept waiting, she rose and rang the bell violently: then she remained standing in anticipation of the entrance of a servant to answer her summons. But no one came. She rang a second time, more violently than at first: but still her summons was unanswered. The flush upon her cheeks deepened into a vivid scarlet—her eyes flashed fire—her nostrils dilated proudly—and she drew herself up to the full of her noble height, as if longing to encounter some one on whom she might vent her wrath.

She was about to ring a third time: but her pride would not permit her. She felt herself outraged, and resolved to leave the mansion that moment. But as she was about to resume her bonnet and cloak, the thought flashed to her like an inspiration that she was perhaps a prisoner. Not choosing to appear so ridiculous even to herself, as to prepare for departure and then find that she was baffled in her purpose, she advanced to the door by which she had been introduced into the room; and she found it locked. Her apprehension was thus confirmed;—but smiling scornfully, she returned to her seat on the sofa.

Her eyes now again fell upon the door facing her, which stood partially open: and she resolved, after some degree of hesitation, to see whither it led. She accordingly approached the door, and perceived that a light shone from within. She advanced—she reached the threshold—and beheld a small but luxuriously-furnished room, lighted by a silver lamp suspended to the ceiling. Sofas were ranged all around against the walls, in the oriental style; and vases of flowers exhaled a delicious perfume. At the extremity of the room another door stood half open; and seeing nobody, Venetia continued to advance.

This second door admitted her into a room still smaller than the one she had just traversed, but still more luxuriously furnished. The carpet was the thickest on which she had ever trodden: there were no sofas, but a number of large and massive arm-chairs, each provided with a cushion of immense size;—and the table in the centre was spread with delicious-looking fruits, confectionary, and sweets in crystal dishes, as well as with wines of numerous descriptions. The scene was lighted by a lamp with a ground-glass globe, so that the lustre was subdued and mellow.

A third door stood open before Venetia's eyes: and, still encountering no human soul, she pursued her way. But now she entered into a gallery where the light was softer and far more subdued than it even was in the refreshment-chamber which she had just traversed; and pausing for a few moments, she perceived that this gallery was filled with pictures and statues. Her curiosity increased: the anger which she had ere now experienced to such a degree was fast merging into a feeling of admiration at the beautiful suite of apartments she was now exploring;—and she advanced farther into the gallery.

The first object which she now contemplated with attention was a sculptured group of the Three Graces, as large as life: but as she gazed upon the exquisite work of art, the thought imperceptibly stole into her mind that instead of being characterised by that charming air of innocence with which those heathen personifications are usually invested, there was something deeply sensuous in the countenances and attitudes of the statues. She passed on to the next group, which represented Leda toying with Jupiter in the form of a swan. The sculpture was exquisite—and at the first glance the effect was a feeling of delight at the survey of so perfect a creation from marble. But by dwelling upon the piece the eye became aware that the softly sensuous air which invested the first group, deepened into a more confirmed voluptuousness with this second one: for the whole attitude of Leda indicated a tremulous longing for some unknown joy, as that amorous dalliance with the disguised god poured its impassioned influence throughout her whole frame.

The effects thus described, as produced by the two first specimens of sculpture, were not however of that decided character which could destroy the more pleasing impression arising from the beautiful perfection of the workmanship. Venetia accordingly advanced to examine the third group, which represented Mars and Venus clasped in each other's arms, and ensnared by the almost invisible but inextricable net-work which the jealous Vulcan had spread to surprise them. As a specimen of art the design and execution were inimitable: but the beauty of the Goddess of Love was so intimately blended with an expression of wantonness, that the very effigy appeared to glow and palpitate as if ready to burst into the ardour of ungovernable passion. But still there was nothing that could possibly shock or disgust the female mind: the impression produced was that of a highly-wrought scene in a novel, where the artifice of well chosen language and the fascinations of poetic description flimsily wrap up the naked truth. Venetia therefore passed on to the fourth group of marble statues: and this represented a Satyr seizing upon a Dryad, or Wood-Nymph, whom he was supposed to have surprised in her nude loveliness as she issued from a stream where she had been bathing.

This specimen, though as admirable as the others in point of art, was nevertheless so flagrant in its undisguised indecency, that Miss Trelawney at once turned away shocked and disgusted: and as she was retreating towards the door by which she had entered the gallery, her eyes fell upon one of the pictures suspended to the wall. The subject was the Rape of the Sabines: in fact, the picture was to a certain degree a copy of Reubens' splendid master-piece that is now preserved at the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square:—but the copyist had so enhanced the indelicacy of the scene, and had heightened its details into such voluptuous effects, that it burst upon the gaze like the sudden exposure of an orgie in a brothel.

With glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, and palpitating bosom, Venetia Trelawney rushed back into the refreshment-room, where she threw herself into

one of the arm-chairs already noticed. But scarcely had she thus sunk down upon the flocculent cushion, when a sharp click as of some mechanism giving way met her ears—and at the same instant her wrists were caught in manacles which sprang out of the arms of the treacherous chair, while two steel bands started from the richly-carved back and grasped her shoulders. A shriek burst from her lips—she struggled violently, but all to no purpose: for she was a captive—and powerless!

We should observe that the manacles and the steel bands which had thus fastened upon her, were covered with velvet, so that they inflicted no positive injury upon her, nor even produced the slightest abrasion of her fair and polished skin.

Scarcely was she thus caught in the gripe of the treacherous chair, when a door which fitted so admirably into the wall that she had not previously observed its existence, was thrown open—and the Marquis of Leveson stood in her presence.

"My lord," she immediately exclaimed, in a voice of gentle remonstrance, "this is most unworthy treatment towards one who came voluntarily to your mansion, knowing that Friday was *your* day for prosecuting the love-campaign against Venetia Trelawney."

"Ah! you are then acquainted with the secret compact of your six admirers," said the Marquis, in astonishment: "and you are aware of the existence of that wager which I am this night destined to win?"

"I know all, my lord," answered Venetia: "and what is more, I knew when entering the carriage at Hyde Park corner, that it was your equipage and that I was coming to your abode."

"But who acquainted you with the particulars of the compact and the love-campaign?" inquired the Marquis, who had expected to be overwhelmed with reproaches instead of experiencing so much meekness and humility on the part of the beauteous creature on whom his eyes were now fixed with gloating fervour and devouring passion.

"On Wednesday evening," responded Miss Trelawney, in a gentle tone, "Colonel Malpas told me everything."

"But you had intended to abandon yourself to the Prince of Wales, divine being!" exclaimed the Marquis, approaching nearer to her and rivetting his eyes upon the bosom that was palpitating with visible heavings.

"It is true," was Miss Trelawney's ready answer, delivered with an air of charming though mournful sincerity. "But the instant that your footman whispered in my ears the announcement which was intended to beguile me, I read the whole truth as clearly as if it had been explained in detail. I saw that the Prince had treacherously made you his confidant—I remembered that it was your day to adopt proceedings with regard to me—and I understood in a moment that you had availed yourself of the opportunity afforded by the appointment which I had made with his Royal Highness. Unhesitatingly was my mind made up that instant. I resolved to punish the Prince's perfidy by fixing my choice on you and accepting the overtures which I presume you are prepared to make."

"Ah! my dearest Venetia," exclaimed Lord Leveson, "if I had known all this—if I could have anticipated that your thoughts had taken a turn so completely in my favour and that such happiness was in store for me, you would have found me at your feet the instant you entered the drawing-room. But I cannot even now scarcely believe——"

"My lord, listen and I will be candid with you," said Venetia, the earnestness of her looks deepening in expression. "So soon as Colonel Malpas revealed to me the trammels of this compact, conspiracy, or love-campaign—whichever you may please to denominate it—I resolved to accept the overtures of the individual who was most exalted in rank. I therefore chose the Prince. But he has performed a treacherous part in betraying his success to your ears: whereas the proceeding you have adopted to delude me to your mansion, is only as tratagem that may be regarded as legitimate enough in the operations of a love-siege. I therefore resolved, the moment the truth flashed upon my mind in the manner I have described, to discard the Prince and accept your lordship. For next to his Royal Highness is your rank the loftiest of all my suitors, and consequently the more calculated to reflect honour upon me. Had not these been my intentions, I need not have come hither. Your servants would not have dared to retain me a prisoner in the carriage, if I had chosen to leave it: my screams would have aroused all Piccadilly to the rescue. Moreover, think you that when the carriage turned into Albemarle Street, I could any longer remain in doubt, even if I had for a moment experienced any uncertainty upon the point, to whose mansion it was that I was being borne? And had I wished to fly, could I not have done so the instant I descended the steps of the carriage? My lord, you perceive that my conduct in every respect corroborates all I tell you."

"It does—it does, my beloved Venetia," exclaimed the enraptured Marquis, in a delirium of joy and ecstacy at the unexpected turn which the adventure had thus taken. "And you will be mine, Venetia?—you will be mine—wholly mine?"

"I will be your's, my lord," she replied, firmly and deliberately. "You will do all that lies in your power to minister to my happiness——"

"All—everything!" exclaimed the nobleman, trembling with the delicious anticipation of revelling in that divine creature's charms. "Five thousand a year shall be settled upon you, my Venetia: you shall be surrounded with luxuries, enjoyments, and pleasures! Oh! let me hasten to release you from this restraint which I so deeply deplore—let me clasp you in my arms——"

And stepping behind the chair, he touched a spring, the effect of which was instantaneous for the purpose of release: so that the manacles flying from the imprisoned wrists and the steel bands from the ivory shoulders, sank back into the woodwork of the treacherous chair.

"Pardon me this outrage, dearest Venetia—most adored of women!" exclaimed the Marquis, catching her in his embrace as she rose slowly from the seat.

"Ah! it was too bad of you, my lord," she murmured, winding her snowy arms about his neck.

For an instant she abandoned herself to his fervid caresses: but it was only that she might throw him completely off his guard;—for the next moment, with a sudden and dexterous jerk, she flung

him forcibly into the chair whence she had just been released.

The sharp click of the hidden mechanism was heard—the manacles closed upon his wrists—the velvet-covered bands grasped his shoulders—and, with a dreadful imprecation, the Marquis of Leveson found himself caught in his own trap.

Then the whole demeanour and bearing of Venetia Trelawney changed in a moment: the assumed meekness and humility were succeeded by the flush of mingled triumph and indignation—and, drawing her splendid form up to its full height, she looked down upon the enraged and almost frenzied nobleman with a blighting scorn and a crushing contempt.

"Wretch!" she exclaimed, in the swelling tones of her divine voice; "did you dare carry your presumption, your vanity, and your conceit to such an outrageous extent as to believe that I should accept the overtures of so loathsome and repulsive a being as yourself? Miserable imbecile—vile voluptuary, you are now worthily punished! It would only be a righteous and well-merited portion of my vengeance, were I to summon all the menials of your household to contemplate the utter ignomy of their master. But I will spare you this supreme disgrace—this crowning shame: and I will leave you to emancipate yourself from your captivity as best you may! One word more, however, before we part,—and that is to tell you that I did indeed come hither of my own accord—but not to accept your overtures or receive your nauseous love. I came to gratify a sentiment of curiosity—to see how you would carry on *your* campaign—and also to overwhelm you with reproaches and upbraidings for daring to practise your treacherous schemes against me. And now, my lord, you may rest assured that you have naught to expect save loathing, contempt, and scorn at the hands of Venetia Trelawney!"

Pale—trembling all over—shrinking beneath the withering looks of the incensed lady—and as powerless in the embrace of the treacherous chair as she herself had so recently been,—the Marquis of Leveson gasped for utterance—but could speak no word. His throat was as dry and his tongue as parched as if he had been swallowing ashes: and his feelings were scarcely enviable even by a man about to be hung. These feelings, too, were the more poignant, inasmuch as amidst them was entertwined a sense of the opportunity he had lost,—that opportunity which had ere now placed Venetia so completely in his power, and of which he might have availed himself to gratify his passion and consummate a triumph!

With another and last scornful look upon the abject nobleman, she turned away and left the apartment.

Hastening back to the Crimson Drawing Room, she put on her bonnet and cloak—drew the veil over her countenance—and approached the door. But it suddenly struck her that it was locked ere now when she had previously tried it—and so it still was. Nothing daunted, however, she remembered the door by which the Marquis had entered the refreshment-room: and she at once retraced her way thither.

"Miss Trelawney," said the nobleman, in a piteous tone—for in the interval he had recovered the use of his speech,—"I implore you to release me!"

She made no reply—but searched for the means of opening the secret door.

"You will not succeed," he observed, in the same voice of humble entreaty: "but if you will release me, I swear——"

"No, my lord," exclaimed Venetia, firmly: "I will sooner return to the drawing-room—fling open the window—and summon assistance from the street. Now, will you expose yourself to this disgrace?—will you compel me to explain to strangers the infamy of the treatment I have experienced in this house?"

The Marquis deliberated for a few moments; and then he said—"I will tell you how to open that secret door on one condition?"

"Name it," she replied.

"That when you descend into the hall, you will tell the porter to send my valet Brockman to me immediately?" answered the wretched nobleman.

"I consent to do this," rejoined Venetia.

"I rely upon your word," he said. "Now press hard upon that rose on the paper nearest to the handle of the bell-pull."

Venetia did as she was directed—and the door instantaneously flew open. Without bestowing another word or look upon the Marquis, she pursued her way—traversed a small dressing room—thence passed into a bed-chamber—and ultimately emerged upon the landing. With hasty steps she descended the stairs—reached the hall—delivered the nobleman's message to a page whom she encountered there—and the next moment was safe in the open street.

The clocks were at this instant proclaiming the hour of ten: and she hesitated what course to pursue. But speedily making up her mind, she entered a hackney-coach in Piccadilly, ordering it to drive to Carlton House and set her down at the private door.

In a few minutes she reached the princely palace—and remaining in the vehicle until a servant answered the loud knock given by the coachman, she inquired of the lacquey if his royal master were at home. The reply was in the affirmative; and descending from the coach, which she ordered to wait for her, Venetia was at once escorted up a private staircase into a splendidly furnished apartment, where the domestic begged her to be seated. Then, without inquiring her name,—for the lacquey had no doubt that the veiled and cloaked lady came by appointment,—he left the room to inform the Prince of the arrival.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE INTERVIEW.

VENETIA was not kept waiting many minutes before his Royal Highness made his appearance. He was attired in evening costume: his face was slightly flushed with drinking;—but the expression of his countenance was one of mingled joy and surprise as he hastily accosted Miss Trelawney.

"My dear Venetia," he exclaimed, extending his hand, which she did not however take, "this is an unexpected pleasure after your note, which, I can assure you, caused me the greatest pain."

"My note, sir!" she echoed: then instantly com-

prehending that a forgery had been committed by the Marquis of Leveson for the purpose of preventing the Prince's carriage from being at the place of appointment, she said in her usual tranquil manner, "I sent you no communication of any kind, sir."

"Ah! then I perceive that there is something wrong," cried the Prince. "You refuse me your hand—you are offended with me——"

"I have been badly treated, sir,—ungenerously, unhandsomely, discourteously treated," observed Miss Trelawney, who had thrown back her veil but remained standing: and as she spoke, her splendid features were animated with a displeasure amounting almost to indignation.

"Venetia, if I have done anything to offend you," said the Regent, earnestly, "I implore your forgiveness: and when *I* use the word '*implore*,' it can only be addressed to some one whose displeasure I would not for worlds incur. I do not know, Venetia, that this word was ever uttered by me to any woman until now."

"We will enter upon explanations, sir, if you please," replied the fair one, somewhat mollified by the tone, manner, and language of her royal suitor.

"You will do me the honour to be seated," said the Prince, pointing to the sofa.

"Your Royal Highness spoke of some letter which you had received," said Miss Trelawney, as she sate down, while the Prince placed himself near her.

"Here it is," he observed as he took a note from his waistcoat pocket and handed it to her.

She hastily ran her eye over its contents, which were penned in a beautiful female hand and were as follow:—

"Friday Evening, 8 o'clock.

"Miss Trelawney presents her dutiful and affectionate compliments to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, and begs to inform His Royal Highness that a severe indisposition, which has suddenly attacked her, will prevent her from keeping her appointment with his Royal Highness this evening.

"Miss Trelawney however entertains the hope that in the course of a few days she shall be enabled to assure his Royal Highness of her restoration to health."

"That note is a forgery, sir," said Venetia, her countenance still glowing with the indignation that crimsoned it the moment she began the perusal of the mendacious missive. "This is not my handwriting, sir—and my presence here is a proof that I am not suffering from any indisposition whatsoever."

"Then, by heavens! it is a foul trick!" exclaimed His Royal Highness: "and I can guess," he added, in the heat of passion, "who is the concocter of the treachery. But what has happened?—where have you been?" he demanded, hastily—his suspicions having instantaneously fallen upon the Marquis of Leveson.

"First let me ask," said Venetia, coldly and reservedly, "to whom your royal Highness communicated all that passed between us yesterday?"

"Ah! now I must indeed implore your pardon—and upon my knees too!" he exclaimed, falling at Venetia's feet—for he saw that she knew all. "I confess that I was fool—dolt—idiot—imbecile enough to make a confidant of a man whom I believed to be a friend! But tell me, Venetia—charming Venetia—is my offence of a gravity beyond all forgiveness?"

"Rise, sir—rise!" said Miss Trelawney. "This humiliation is more than I require—more than I expected——"

"Then you pardon me?" exclaimed the Prince, eagerly.

"I pardon you, sir," responded the lady.

"Oh! thanks—ten thousand thanks!" cried the Regent, seizing her hand in rapture and conveying it to his lips: then, rising from his suppliant posture and resuming his seat by her side, he said in a low deep tone, "You are more generous than I have been, Venetia: but your conduct in thus pardoning me will render me all the more anxious to ensure your happiness."

"Henceforth, sir," remarked Venetia, with softening tone and manner, "I hope that anything which may pass between us, will receive the inviolability which an honourable man is wont to observe under such circumstances?"

"On my soul, Venetia, you shall never—never have to reproach me with breach of confidence for the future!" exclaimed his Royal Highness: then throwing his arms around her, he imprinted a fervid, burning kiss upon her lips.

She gently disengaged herself from his embrace: and he besought her to remove her bonnet and cloak. With this request she at once complied: and then he beheld her in all the splendour of that beauty which was set off to so much advantage by the dark velvet dress she wore, and which had produced so powerful an effect upon the Marquis of Leveson.

"Venetia, you are charming—you are charming!" exclaimed the Prince, as his eyes dwelt gloatingly upon the bare shoulders and the exposed bosom of the superb creature: then once more flinging his arms around her, he drew her towards him—strained her to his breast—and covered her face with warm and impassioned kisses.

"We have not yet finished our explanations," she said, struggling to disengage herself a second time from his embrace.

"No—I will not release you," he exclaimed, holding her with all the force of a frenzied passion that trembled in itself: "I will not release you until your lips have given me back one of those kisses which I have left upon them!"

"There, sir—there!" cried Venetia, bestowing a hurried caress upon her royal lover. "And now release me," she added, with another and successful struggle.

"What explanations have we left unsaid, my angel?" asked the Prince, the blood flowing like molten lead in his veins and his whole being consuming as it were with the fires of an indomitable passion: for the contact of that splendid form and the influence of that kiss were more than enough to madden him with desire.

"Have you no interest—no curiosity in ascertaining what has befallen me this evening?" inquired Venetia, as she smoothed her disordered hair. "Think you that the note which I have just read was penned without a purpose?"

"I had forgotten everything save the pleasure experienced in your divine presence, my angel," exclaimed the Prince. "My head swims with rapturous thoughts—my senses are bewildered with an excess of elysian bliss—my ideas are thrown

into a beatific confusion! But tell me, darling Venetia—tell me what has happened."

"I was faithful to the appointment, sir," replied the lady; "and a carriage was in waiting. It bore me to the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson——"

"Maledictions upon him!" ejaculated the Prince, stamping his foot with rage. "Because I forgot to send him a written promise relative to the trumpery Garter——But proceed, dearest—proceed."

"Oh! the Marquis was so far justified in his proceedings, at least towards your Royal Highness," exclaimed Venetia, with a good-humoured archness, "inasmuch as Friday is *his* day——"

"What! is it possible?" cried the Prince, starting as if electrified. "The particulars of the compact——"

"Are all known to me!" added Miss Trelawney, with a deepening archness of look that rendered her enchantingly wicked.

"But how?" demanded the Prince, overwhelmed with mingled perplexity and confusion. "Did the Marquis himself——"

"No, sir," interrupted Venetia: "his lordship was as much astonished as you are when I convinced him that the entire particulars of the compact made at his house last week, are known to me."

"Then who is the traitor?" inquired the Prince, eagerly.

"Colonel Malpas," was the immediate response.

"The sneaking—despicable—grovelling scoundrel!" ejaculated his Royal Highness. "If ever he ventures to appear in my presence again, I will order him to leave it—the treacherous villain!"

"He hoped to ingratiate himself into my favour by telling me everything," continued Venetia. "But I treated him with the contempt he deserved."

"I am glad of it!" exclaimed the Prince. "Henceforth he shall find in me a bitter, unrelenting enemy. But enough of such a miscreant! Tell me what took place between yourself, my Venetia, and the Marquis of Leveson."

"I treated him also as he deserved," responded Miss Trelawney, her countenance glowing with the irradiation of triumph as she thought of the discomfiture of the wretched nobleman whom she had left to an ignominious exposure in the eyes of his valet. "Your Royal Highness need not be angry with the wretched old man when you meet again: I can assure you he is punished enough."

"But how?—tell me how?" exclaimed the Regent, his curiosity tensely excited.

"I left him secure and safe in the trap which has doubtless caught so many who have become his victims," replied Venetia, significantly: and she fixed her gaze upon the Prince to see if he caught her meaning.

"What? in one of his mechanical chairs?" immediately cried his Royal Highness, a suspicion of the truth flashing to his mind: for he was no stranger to the mysteries of the Marquis of Leveson's mansion.

"I see that you understand me, sir," replied Venetia: then, in a few words, she explained the particulars of her adventure with the Marquis.

"This is excellent—capital!" exclaimed the Prince, laughing heartily. "You are indeed right when you say that Leveson has been adequately punished. He has encountered a woman of ingenuity and spirit; and his mortification must be immense. But now that all our explanations are over, Venetia——"

"I must take my departure," said the lady, rising. "It is eleven o'clock—and I dare not remain away any longer. Remember, sir, I stipulated that my reputation was to be preserved as much as possible—and at all events until after the marriage which I propose to contract without delay——"

"Ah! cruel Venetia!" exclaimed the Prince: "you tantalize me with your presence—you drive me mad by permitting partial caresses——"

"Remember, sir, it is not my fault that I was not here long ago," said Venetia. "If you really love me—if you have any regard for my happiness—you will permit me to depart at once. Indeed, the vehicle that brought me hither is waiting——"

"But when shall we meet again, my angel?" inquired the Prince, taking her hand and pressing it between both his own.

"I will write to you—if your Royal Highness will grant me the permission?" said Venetia.

"Permission!" he echoed. "Write to me as often as you please—the oftener the better:—and the sooner also in the first instance, the more agreeable will it be. Ah! Venetia! keep me not long in suspense——"

"I will write soon," she observed. "And now farewell for the present."

"Farewell, my angel—my beauty—my darling!" exclaimed the Regent, catching her in his arms and fastening his lips to her's.

She returned the kiss which he imprinted upon her moist red mouth: then, disengaging herself with some difficulty from the fervid embrace in which he so passionately enfolded her, she threw on her bonnet and cloak, drew down the thick veil, and took her departure.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RETRIBUTION.

It was midnight; and the moon was riding high in the heavens as a hackney-coach stopped in a shady lane branching off from the main road at Blackheath. A lady and gentleman alighted: and the latter, having bade the driver wait for them, gave the former his arm and hurried her down the narrow thoroughfare towards a house which stood at a distance of about a quarter of a mile from where the vehicle had stopped.

Not a word was spoken by either the gentleman or his companion as they thus proceeded at a rapid pace. The former was past the prime of life—tall and stoutly built—of genteel appearance—and well dressed. The lady was considerably younger—very beautiful—and enveloped in an ample cloak.

She trembled from head to foot—yes, trembled as the aspen leaf, with a quivering that influenced her entire frame. But it assuredly was not with cold—for the night was serene and calm—one of those beautiful September nights which lose not the warmth of the autumnal day: and moreover, she was well wrapped up in that thick and capacious mantle. Nevertheless she trembled—but it was with the chill shuddering that takes its rise

from the heart: and her teeth chattered as if it were in the middle of snowy January or bleak March.

The house which this lady and her male companion were approaching, stood in the midst of spacious grounds; and the front garden was enclosed with a wall having a carriage-gate and a smaller door in the centre. But the gentleman and lady paused not at this entrance: they skirted the wall—turned the angle—passed round to the back of the house—and entered the premises by a door which was unfastened.

At a distance of about fifty yards a dim light appeared amidst the trees of the garden in the rear of the house: and in the direction of this light did the gentleman conduct the lady.

"Who is there?—and what are they doing?" suddenly demanded the lady, in a subdued voice of hysterical quickness, as if she full well divined the nature of the answer she should receive to her question, and shuddered at the bare thought thereof.

"There is only one person on that spot," returned the gentleman, in a harsh and almost brutal tone: "and he is digging a grave."

"A grave!" murmured the lady, repeating the awful words in that mechanical and involuntary way which denotes the profound concentration of the direst horror.

"Yes—a grave," exclaimed her companion, with a brutal abruptness that was alike undisguised and unmistakable. "Surely you might have suspected as much when you saw the light of the lantern gleaming yonder. Besides, what the devil else did we come hither for but to bury the dead man?—and if he's to be buried, there must be a grave, I suppose."

"O God! do not talk in this heartless—callous—brutal manner!" exclaimed the unhappy lady, in a tone of the most touching, penetrating entreaty.

"Then don't be a fool and give way to any maudlin sentimentalism at this moment," retorted the individual whom we must style *a gentleman*, merely to distinguish his rank in life,—although in conduct he assuredly merited the appellation no more than the British Aristocracy deserves to be called humane, or England a free country—the very reverse being the case in both instances.

"Why treat me with this fiendish harshness?" demanded the lady bitterly, as if her feelings were goaded to a pitch of desperation. "Have you any right *now*—after all that has occurred—to punish or even taunt me for the past?"

"Come—let's have no quarrelling, if you please," said the gentleman, sternly. "You hang back? By heaven——"

"Oh! spare me—spare me!" murmured the wretched lady, imploringly, as she stopped short and seemed sinking to the ground. "I can not—will not approach that grave!"

"Then, by heaven! you shall sleep in it yourself, along with your lover!" replied her companion, seizing her by the arm and shaking her with a ruffian violence.

"What! would you murder me?" she ejaculated, in gasping horror and agonising affright: and as she gazed up at her ruthless husband—for such indeed was her companion—the moonbeams fell upon her countenance, showing how terribly it was convulsed and distorted, all its beauty obliterated as it were for the moment.

"Come—no more of this nonsense—or you will put me into a rage and provoke me to do you a mischief," said her husband. "I swore that you should accompany me this night—and indeed, why should you not? 'Tis *your* work, not *mine*, that is being done: and you ought to be infinitely obliged to me for taking all this trouble to conceal for ever the traces of an occurrence that might readily be construed into a crime."

"I will accompany you," said the lady, in a tone of desperate resignation, as if the truth and justice of her husband's last speech had sunk profoundly into her soul. "Yes—I will accompany you through this tremendous ordeal, since you wish it——"

"Aye—and I command it," he observed, with that brutal ferocity which characterised his language and his conduct towards his wife, who, guilty though she might have been, yet deserved not the treatment which this coward ruffian was observing in regard to her.

"Be it so," she said, meekly: "you command—and I obey. Only, for God's sake—I conjure you—I implore you—speak less harshly to me—for I am miserable, very miserable, I can assure you!"

And she burst into an agony of weeping.

Her husband suffered her thus to pour forth the torrents of her ineffable affliction without breathing a word of solace or pardon. In sullen and inhuman reserve—in profound and cruel silence—he stood gazing upon her as she wept. At the expiration of two or three minutes she became calmer: her grief had found a vent—her surcharged bosom was relieved—and taking her husband's arm once more, she suffered him to lead her forward to the spot where the light was still remaining stationary in its sinister dimness.

Concealed amongst a group of trees, and with a lantern placed upon the ground, a man was digging a grave. On hearing footsteps approach, he desisted from his work; and, leaning upon his shovel as he stood in the pit which he was making, his head and shoulders only were visible as he looked in the direction of those persons who were advancing. The dim rays of the lantern shone mistily upon his countenance—but enough to reveal its ghastly repulsiveness and diabolical expression to the eyes of the lady as she tremblingly clung to the arms of her husband.

"O God! what a hideous-looking man!" she murmured, in a rapid whisper to herself rather than to her companion: and she held back in terror, as if it were a corpse that was gazing out of the grave at her.

"Hold your tongue, you fool," growled her husband, savagely: "he is an excellent fellow—and I don't know what the devil I should have done without him. Well," he exclaimed aloud, addressing himself to the man, as he dragged rather than led his unfortunate wife nearer to the grave,—"hard at work, eh?"

"I've been here these two hours," replied the man; "and you see I have made pretty good progress. You told me it was to be deep ——"

"Yes: we don't want the corpse to be easily raked up by the first gardener who comes to work in the place," said the gentleman, with a chuckle which sounded horribly upon his wife's ears. "My

lease is up on quarter-day—and I dare say the place will soon let again, even if there be not a new tenant ready to come in on Michaelmas day, which is next week. So it was necessary to lose no time ——"

"Aye, aye—I understand," observed the man in the grave. "You had better lose no time either in talking, sir: and if the pit is deep enough ——"

"Quite deep enough," said the gentleman. "I and my wife will go up and get the corpse out of its hiding-place ——"

"And I'll be with you in a few minutes to help you down with it," interrupted the man,—"directly I've shovelled up the loose dirt at the bottom."

"Very good," returned the gentleman: and he led his wife away from the grave, where she had been standing in a state of mind that can be more readily conceived than depicted.

They now hastened towards the house which was only a few yards distant; and the gentleman opened the back door by means of a key which he had about him. He then passed into the kitchen, followed by his wife; and, having lighted a candle, he led the way up-stairs.

Not a word was spoken: the dead silence of the hour and place was broken only by the footsteps of the husband—for those of his wife were noiseless. The unhappy lady was pale as death: but her features were calm—calm even to immobility. She had now concentrated all her energies to face a fearful scene and pass through a tremendous ordeal: her mental powers were all collected at one point—and she felt that with a single moment of yielding or weakness, the whole would give way. It was the courage of desperation that now armed her—the fortitude of one who has resolved to stretch every chord of the heart and strain every nerve of the brain in order to dare and endure the worst!

Her husband ascended the stairs with the candle in his hand—and she followed close behind him. Their lengthened shadows upon the wall and the desolate echo of his footsteps as they traversed the spacious hall, alarmed her for a moment: but she compressed her ashy lips tightly, to suppress the scream that was passing as it were behind them.

The house had been let to them ready furnished: and everything was in precisely the same state as when they left it some months previously. On leaving it at the time referred to, some domestics had remained in charge of the premises: but on reaching the Continent, the husband had immediately written over to discharge them, as he found that his means would not permit him to retain either them or the establishment. They had therefore left within a week after their master and mistress had themselves departed: but during the few days they had thus remained at the villa previously to receiving the written notice from abroad to quit their master's service, they had not discovered the *one* tremendous secret which this house contained!

The nature of that secret may haply be guessed by the intelligent reader: but we will resume the thread of our narrative in due course.

The husband and wife ascended the stairs leading to the first floor. They entered the bed-chamber—and thence the former passed at once and unhesitatingly into a bath-room adjoining. The unhappy lady felt as if her courage were giving way—as if her fortitude, strained as it was to so unnatural a degree of tension, must break down all on a sudden. She leant against the bed-post for support: she clung to it to save herself from falling. Her brain appeared to reel—her sight grew dim—scorpions were tearing at her heart: but an impatient word from her husband commanding her to follow him, struck upon her ear;—and gathering again all her energies that were so fast scattering, she advanced with slow steps—as if she were a corpse, moving stiffly—into the bath-room.

A faint and sickly odour—the unmistakable exhalation of the dead—assailed her nostrils: and now a wild, wordless, gurgling sound came from her lips — those lips that were instantaneously compressed again, to keep down any further emission of the horrible sensations that were harrowing her soul. Her eyes glared fixedly: but her cheeks remained pallid and colourless as if the skin were altogether unsusceptible of reflecting any vital tint.

The husband placed the candle upon the toilette-table—and then proceeded to raise the lid of the bath. The odour instantaneously became more powerful: but it was not that noxious smell which made the miserable woman reel as if suddenly struck by a hammer—it was the convulsing violence of her own tremendously-excited feelings.

"My God! my God!" she murmured to herself, as she staggered against the wall after catching a glimpse of the object that lay within the bath.

And that object was a corpse!—the corpse of him whom she had loved so fondly and so well—the loathsome, decomposing remains of one who in his life-time was so handsome in person, so fascinating in manners, and so harmonious in voice.

"Come, now—help me out with this body!" said her husband, gruffly, as he drew forth a silken rope ladder from the interior of the bath and tossed it upon the floor.

"No—no—I cannot—I will not!" she shrieked forth in a rending tone: and then she wrung her hands in despair.

"You cannot—you will not?" exclaimed the gentleman, turning savagely round upon her. "By heaven, madam, if you talk thus to me, you shall sleep in the same grave with your paramour!"

"Oh! spare me—spare me!" she cried, joining her hand in piteous appeal. "Let the man help you to raise——"

"Perdition!" ejaculated her husband, furiously. "You want to throw all the work upon me, as if I had any hand in his death! Come, now—give me your assistance—or else——"

"Yes, yes—I will assist you!" she exclaimed, driven almost to frenzy with horror and alarm. "Do not hurt me—do not touch me," she cried, as his arm was raised to strike her,—"and I will obey you to the uttermost."

Then with reeling brain and throbbing heart, she took two or three desperate steps forward—leant over the side of the bath—and assisted her husband to lift out the body. As they were thus engaged, he turned upon her for a moment a look of fiendish satisfaction and diabolical triumph,—a look from which she averted her eyes in horror, as if from a loathsome reptile or a ghastly spectre suddenly springing up by her side.

At this moment the man who had been digging the grave entered the room;—and the lady's services were now dispensed with in the removal of the decomposing corpse of her paramour.

She took a sheet from the bed in the adjacent room, and threw it over the body—a proceeding to which her husband did not object, inasmuch as its flesh was too loathsome to make him at all anxious to touch it. He and the man then raised it between them, and bore their burthen down the staircase, the lady following with the candle in one hand and the rope-ladder in the other. Into the garden was the corpse thus conveyed: it was lowered by means of the silken cords into the pit dug to receive it;—and then the man proceeded to throw in the mould which he had heaped up on either side of the unblest grave.

"You will be sure to lock the garden gate after you," said the gentleman, as he led his wife away from the spot.

"No fear of that, sir," was the reply of the man, as he went on shovelling in the earth: "and I'll give you the key next time we meet."

"That will do. Good night."

"Good night, sir. Good night, ma'am."

But the lady heard him not, as she moved mechanically away leaning upon her husband's arm. An awful consternation was upon her: she felt as if she were walking in a dream—or as if she had just committed some tremendous crime which had steeped all her thoughts in a confused and bewildering numbness.

Presently the hackney-coach was reached: and on entering it, she threw herself back in the seat and burst into an agony of tears.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE STRATAGEMS OF A BOW STREET OFFICER.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning, when Mr. Lawrence Sampson, attired in his best clothes, knocked at the door of the Marquis of Leveson's

mansion in Albermarle Street; and upon mentioning his name, he was at once shown into an elegant breakfast-parlour where the nobleman was sipping his chocolate.

The Marquis was in no particularly good humour after the adventure of the preceding evening,—that adventure which had terminated in affording Venetia Trelawney so complete a triumph over him: but the appearance of Mr. Sampson suddenly cheered him somewhat—for he was instantaneously struck with a presentiment that the astute Bow Street officer had succeeded in the delicate enterprise entrusted to him.

"Well, what news, Mr. Sampson?" inquired the Marquis, hastily.

"Good, my lord," was the answer. "I have discovered the authors of the outrage."

"Then upon my soul you are indeed deserving of the reputation which you have gained!" cried the Marquis. "But sit down and tell me all about it."

"Would your lordship like to hear the course I adopted to ferret out this matter?" asked Larry, as he took a chair: "or shall I come to the point at once?"

"I am anxious to learn how you proceeded—very anxious," said the Marquis: "because if I had taken such a thing in hand, I should not have known how on earth to take even the initiative step—much less carry the affair to a successful issue."

"I can assure your lordship," said Larry, "that I have not only met with some singular adventures in following out this business, but have encountered such a danger that it is next to a miracle I should be here alive to tell your lordship all that occurred."

"Then do tell me, Mr. Sampson," exclaimed the nobleman, settling himself comfortably upon the sofa where he was half reclining. "I am just in a humour to require something exciting to cheer and interest me—something to divert my mind ——But of *that* no matter," he observed, suddenly checking himself as he was about to give utterance to the thoughts which were retrospecting to his adventure of the preceding evening with Miss Trelawney. "And now go on: I am all attention."

"Well, my lord," began Larry Sampson, "I must remind your lordship that it was last Tuesday morning you sent for me and told me of the outrage which had been perpetrated on his Royal Highness and yourself the night before. I must also beg your lordship to recollect that the particulars you gave me relative to the extraordinary adventure of his Royal Highness with the lady, were meagre enough——"

"Because the Prince had only described the apartment very minutely to me, without giving me an equally detailed description of the lady herself whom he saw therein," exclaimed the nobleman. "Nevertheless," he added, "I was enabled to tell you, from the little the Prince *did* explain to me upon this point, that she was extremely beautiful—with light brown hair—dark eyes—and a fine shape. But now go on—and I will endeavour to interrupt you as little as possible."

"From the manner in which the outrage was perpetrated and the ample preparations evidently made for its execution on that particular night," resumed Larry Sampson, "I felt convinced that it was a *put up* affair. This means, my lord, that the desperadoes must have received some positive information beforehand to the effect that the Prince was to visit Mrs. Owen's house that night: and therefore I came to the very natural conclusion that some one in that lady's establishment was in league with the rascals. So, after I left your lordship last Tuesday morning, I went and disguised myself as a knife-grinder—blacked my face in such a way that my own mother, if alive, could not possibly have recognised me—and made myself up, as it were, in such capital style that no disguise out of the many I have at times assumed was ever more complete. I got a regular knife-grinding machine, with tinkering apparatus to boot: and knowing that knife-grinders must be jacks of all trades and mend keys, locks, and umbrellas, I made all necessary preparations. In fact, as I can mend a key about as well as I can talk Chinese or Hebrew—which is, not at all—I filled a drawer in the rattle-trap machine with keys of all sorts, sizes, and descriptions. Thus provided at all points, I took my way to Richmond, determined to insinuate myself somehow or another into conversation with Mrs. Owen's servants. For there's no pretence so good as that of an itinerant knife-grinder to go round to the back doors of houses and draw the domestics into a chat—that is to say, in country places. It would not do in London, where there are scarcely any back doors, or where the servants answer one from the areas: but in the country it is quite otherwise. Well, my lord, it was on Tuesday evening that I entered Richmond disguised as a knife-grinder, and wheeling the moveable shop before me. I adopted the usual slang of the class—spoke wretched English—and played my part, I flatter myself, to perfection. I succeeded even better than I had expected: for when I got opposite Mrs. Owen's mansion, who should come out but her livery-servant. He and I immediately got into conversation; and I saw in a moment by something in the fellow's looks that he was a precious rascal."

"What! John—Mrs. Owen's footman?" exclaimed the Marquis. "Well, upon my soul, Mr. Sampson, I should not have thought it!"

"I dare say not, my lord," observed the Bow Street officer, in his quiet way. "Your lordship is not accustomed to look so keenly and so closely at people as I am. There's no mask a man puts on that I can't see through. But the evil opinion I formed of John the footman the instant I set eyes upon him, was speedily confirmed by what he said ——"

"And he is the scoundrel who is in league with the ruffians, then?" exclaimed the Marquis.

"Your lordship shall know all about it in a moment," said Larry.

"Well, continue after your own fashion," observed the nobleman. "I will endeavour not to interrupt you any more?"—and he again settled himself quietly upon the sofa.

"The footman, my lord," continued Larry Sampson, "speedily engaged me in a conversation which showed me what he was, but which I need not detail to your lordship, because it refers to some other matter that I must still keep a sharp eye upon. In a word, I became convinced that John was in league with the authors of the outrage perpetrated towards the Prince Regent and your

lordship. But still I was resolved to know more of my man; and I accordingly got out of him which public-house he frequented. For I thought to myself, '*You'll be going there, perhaps, presently: and I may as well watch your proceedings a little farther while I am about it.*'—So I went to the head-constable of Richmond, who is a friend of mine; and there I speedily transmogrified myself again. I washed off the soot and black—dressed myself in a peasant's garb—painted my face to have the florid look of country-people—and put on a wig of light hair that resembled a piece of a new door-mat. Thus disguised, I went back to the *King's Arms* (where I had previously taken a glass of ale on passing along just to keep up appearances in case John should inquire whether a knife-grinder had been there). Taking my seat in the tap-room and calling for some refreshments, I waited patiently to see what would turn up. Presently in came a fellow who holds a sort of official situation in the City—not a very creditable or enviable one either—in plain terms, the Hangman, Daniel Coffin: and I thought to myself that the plot was thickening—for I had long suspected Coffin of being a thorough-paced villain and secretly connected with thieves and burglars, although I had never been able to bring anything regularly home to him. Well, my lord, in a short time who should walk in but John the footman? He looked at me suspiciously for a moment; but I could have defied him to recognise me, inasmuch as the Hangman, who was waiting for him, and who knows me as well as I know him, had failed to discover me through my disguise. They talked in a low tone: but my ears are as keen as my eyes are sharp—and I heard enough to convince me that John *was* in league with the desperadoes to a certain extent, and that Daniel the Hangman was one of them."

"Now that you mention the name of *Daniel*," ejaculated the Marquis of Leveson, "I recollect that one of the scoundrels was so addressed by the chief of the gang. In fact this Daniel was sent to get a sheet of paper to wrap up the pocket-book in the manner I described to you on Tuesday morning. But to think that I have been in company with the Public Executioner!" exclaimed the Marquis, his aristocratic pride horribly offended and his exquisite sense of refinement deeply disgusted.

"Well, my lord, these things will happen in life," observed Larry Sampson, quietly. "But to continue my narrative, I must state that finding the Hangman and the footman getting confidential and communicative with each other, I pretended to be asleep; and then they talked more unreservedly, planning a new crime and mentioning the name of a certain old Jeremy, a notorious receiver of stolen goods and melter of plate. To be brief, I obtained a pretty insight into the characters of those two worthies; and when they were gone, I also took my departure. I now saw that I was on the right scent in the investigation of your lordship's affair: and I deliberated what I should do next—because the affair was a delicate one, inasmuch as your lordship required it to be sifted without any noise and in a very quiet manner. All day Wednesday, as your lordship is aware, I was standing opposite your house disguised as a beggar: but nothing came of that stratagem—my services were useless, as your lordship's valet did not give the signal which was to inform me that any particular person was to be followed. Well, at midnight precisely I went away. Hastening home, I speedily resumed my disguise as a knife-grinder; and off I sped to Jacob's Island—a horrible place in Bermondsey—where I knew that there was a den of resort for all kinds of infamous characters. I was likewise aware that it was the night for old Jeremy to visit the house to transact his business; and I thought it not improbable that the Hangman would be there to speak to him concerning that *other* crime which he and the livery-servant had planned at the *King's Arms*, Richmond. At all events I fancied I might learn something of use to me in the matters I had in hand; and relying upon the excellence of my disguise, I went boldly into the lion's den. It was a little past one on Wednesday night—or rather on Thursday morning, when I got there; and knowing how to patter flash—which means, my lord, to talk the slang language—I was enabled to pass myself off as a regular desperate character. My pretext for the visit was a desire to see old Jeremy; and to him I told some tale of an intended robbery and a large booty in anticipation, which quite won the ancient villain's heart. Presently the Hangman came sure enough; and to him I repeated the same story, enlisting him as an accomplice in the pretended crime that was as yet in embryo. From the rascals assembled at the den I subsequently succeeded in gleaning a little useful intelligence relative to the proceedings of some notorious dealers in spurious coin: but not a word was spoken concerning the outrage of Monday night. Of course I could not broach the subject; and I was thinking of taking my departure when a young lady was inveigled into the house. She had money and jewels about her—and the rascals proposed to murder her. The assassination being determined upon, I proposed to do the deed myself——"

"What on earth was that for, Mr. Sampson?" inquired the Marquis, in amazement.

"Because it was the only way to prevent some one else from doing the job in reality," responded Larry, in his wonted imperturbable manner. "I was accordingly deputed to murder the young lady—and I went into the room where she was sleeping. Of course I immediately helped her to escape: but I suppose the noise of opening the shutter or helping her out of the window, reached the ears of the villains—and, suspecting something, they forced open the chamber-door, rushing in after us. To be brief, the young lady got safe off, while I fell down and was stunned by the blow. What now followed I can only conjecture: but I suppose that the ruffians determined upon murdering me—for when I came to my senses, I was plunged into the ditch behind the house. The tide was flowing in from the Thames at the moment—and to this circumstance do I owe my salvation. The current swept me along with tremendous violence: but I caught the supporters of a bridge—lifted myself out of the water—and was thus saved."

"Good heavens, Mr. Sampson, what a peril you escaped!" cried the Marquis of Leveson, shuddering at the bare thought of the horrible situation which the Bow Street officer nevertheless treated with remarkable coolness.

"Well, my lord, it might have been fatal," he said: "but as it was not, there is no use in fright-

ening oneself at what is past. Having got safe on firm ground, I went to a friend's house hard by—cleaned myself—borrowed fresh apparel of him—and sent him out in the interval to ascertain, if possible, what had become of the young lady. He speedily returned with the pleasing intelligence that some men engaged at a wharf had taken her under their protection and no doubt conducted her to a place of safety. In fact, he happened to make his inquiries at the very wharf where the comrades of those men were engaged. I then went home—got some breakfast—changed my attire again—and set off into the City, with the determination of visiting the Hangman's shop: for he is a barber, my lord."

"And what did you go thither for?" inquired the nobleman.

"To ascertain whether the ruffians had found out at Jacob's Island who the knife-grinder really was," responded Larry Sampson: "for I knew not what had taken place while I was remaining senseless through the effects of the fall outside the window. It was accordingly about nine o'clock on Thursday morning when I entered Mr. Daniel Coffin's shop; and I immediately saw by his manner that so far from suspecting *me* in any way, he was dreadfully afraid I suspected *him*. '*So*,' thought I, '*it is all right; and the villains did not discover Larry Sampson in the disguise of the knife-grinder*.'—Thus satisfied on that point, I went into the shop and sate down to be shaved, thinking that if I got the fellow into conversation something might turn up of use to me. In fact, my lord, I never suffer an opportunity of that kind to escape me; and it is strange how the most trivial incidents lead to the most important results in pursuing my avocations at times. So it was in this case. One of Coffin's apprentices—or rather, a lad who was living with him—struck me as being a youth whom I might model to my purposes: and after some discourse, I invited him home with me. But while left alone in the shop for a minute I picked up a bit of paper which had writing on it; and instantaneously perceiving that it was a part of a letter referring to the very business which I had in hand—namely, the sifting of the affair of Monday night—I put it into my pocket. Here it is—and I will read it to your lordship,"

Larry Sampson accordingly produced the scrap of paper, and read the following lines:—

"*Paris, September 6th*, 1814.

"Since you have got a sufficient number of men to do the thing, it may as well be done without delay. But remember that no one besides yourself is to know the real object of the business: let your confederates believe that its motive is purely one of extortion or plunder. You say that the Prince invariably visits Richmond once or twice a week, and that one of these visits will furnish the best opportunity. Be it so. But be sure that you can rely upon the footman of whom you speak. He shall have the twenty guineas—half paid beforehand, and the other half when the thing is done. Mind and take your measures as securely and secretly as possible. I shall be over in London for certain, with my wife, on the 10th. Meantime you must attend to the following instructions. The house * * * * * * *

The fragment of the letter contained no more; and Larry Sampson, consigning it back again to his waistcoat pocket, proceeded with his narrative in the following manner:—

"Well, my lord, I took Coffin's apprentice home with me, and began by regaling him in the handsomest style possible with my means and humble household. There is nothing like giving an Englishman plenty of good eating and drinking in order to open his heart. An Englishman *after* a good meal is quite a different being from an Englishman *before* one. Nor did Jack the Foundling—such is the youth's name—prove an exception to the rule. I insinuated myself into his confidence—held out hopes and promises to him—and gradually brought his ideas and reflections round into the channel that suited my purposes. Not but that I intend to fulfil all the promises I *did* make the unfortunate youth; and I shall render him serviceable in uprooting the infamous gang whose head-quarters are in Jacob's Island. Yesterday morning, my lord, I had a long and serious conversation with the Foundling; and I succeeded in wheedling out of him the secret that the house to which the Prince Regent and your lordship was taken on Monday night was Beechey Manor at Wandsworth."

"Beechey Manor!" echoed Lord Leveson, starting with amazement. "What? is it possible that the General——"

"He very likely had nothing to do with the outrage, my lord," interrupted Larry Sampson. "Indeed, it is most probable that he little knew the purpose for which he was lending his house to certain people——"

"I believe he is on the continent," cried the Marquis;—"run away for debt, I fancy?"

"Just so, my lord," returned Larry. "Well having thus got at a knowledge of the place to which his Royal Highness and your lordship were taken so mysteriously, it was comparatively plain sailing in carrying out the investigation. The next thing to be done was to go to the Manor—inquire who were there—and endeavour to obtain an interview with the occupants, if they were still on the premises. It was also desirable, if possible, to procure some means of identifying the handwriting of the scrap of paper with that of any party whom I might chance to find at the Manor. Well, my lord, I forthwith assumed another disguise: and this time it was a postman's. Away I sped to the vicinage of Wandsworth, and soon ascertained that a gentleman and lady calling themselves Bradshaw, had been staying about a week at the Manor and were still there. I learnt also that the lady was young and beautiful, and seldom went out: and I likewise discovered that they had been in France. Convinced that I was upon the right scent, I continued my way to the Manor. There was the gateway into which the carriage was introduced, as your lordship described, last Monday night: there also was the side door! After some parley with an old domestic, I was introduced into the presence of a beautiful lady seated in an elegant drawing-room. This apartment was furnished just as the Prince described it to you, and as your lordship represented it in turn to me. It must have been the hall which was hung with the black cloth, and into which you were introduced on arriving at the Manor on the night in question. Well, my lord, the lady corresponded with the description—light brown hair, dark eyes, and a superb shape."

"Is she so wondrously handsome?" inquired the Marquis eagerly.

"She is indeed, my lord," returned Larry: "perfectly enchanting."

"Did your ever see a certain Miss Trelawney, who lives at Acacia Cottage, Knightsbridge?" asked the nobleman.

"I have, my lord," was the reply. "She has been pointed out to me in the park."

"And which of the two is the handsomer," demanded Lord Leveson: "Miss Trelawney or Mrs. Bradshaw?"

"I cannot pretend to be a very excellent judge of beauty, my lord," rejoined Mr. Sampson: "but I should say that Miss Trelawney is the best-looking of the two. Next to her, however, Mrs. Bradshaw—if such is really her name—is assuredly the handsomest woman I ever saw in all my life."

"Good!" observed the Marquis, complacently. "And now proceed."

"I have not much more to tell, my lord," resumed Larry: "only to state that I managed to wheedle Mrs. Bradshaw out of General Beechey's address in the handwriting of her husband—and that this handwriting exactly corresponds with that of the fragment of a note picked up at Daniel Coffin's."

"Then Mrs. Bradshaw is the gossamer lady, beyond all possibility of doubt?" exclaimed the Marquis, overjoyed at the idea and hope which he now cherished of possessing her.

"I have not a doubt of it, my lord," responded the Bow Street officer.

"But it is quite clear, then," observed the Marquis, "that her husband must have been a party to her dishonour last Monday night?"

"That is quite clear, my lord," answerd Larry. "The fragment of the letter proves as much. Indeed, the love-affair was evidently got up as a means to enable Mrs. Bradshaw to procure the Prince's signature to the document. That was the grand aim of the whole affair: but the assistants in the business were to be made believe that the object went no further than plunder. It is therefore certain that Mrs. Bradshaw's conduct with the Prince was instigated by her husband."

"Mr. Sampson," said the Marquis, "you have taken a vast amount of trouble in this matter—you have incurred great personal risks—and you have exhibited uncommon tact in prosecuting the inquiry. But I do not wish the slightest publicity given to the affair—neither does his Royal Highness."

"I understood this much, my lord, at the outset," observed Sampson.

"Do you intend to take proceedings for the attempt to murder you in Jacob's Island?" asked the nobleman.

"I do not, my lord," replied Sampson: "because if I did, it would more or less compel me to explain why I went thither in disguise—and such explanations could not be given without broaching the secret affair of the outrage on the Prince."

"That is just what I thought," said the Marquis.

"Moreover," continued Larry, "I shall be able to pay Master Daniel Coffin out in another way—most probably to-morrow night: and by the assistance of his lad, who is now with me, I shall in due time get the whole of the gang into my power. I presume your lordship has obtained no clue to the means whereby the pocket-book was returned so mysteriously?"

"Not a whit," exclaimed Leveson. "The mystery puzzles me sorely; and I do not see how it is ever to be unravelled."

"I must confess myself completely at fault in that respect," said Larry. "Your lordship's confidential valet is above suspicion?" he added, inquiringly.

"Perfectly so. In fact, I know not what to think," continued the Marquis. "The only persons who visited me on Wednesday were my nephew, Lord Algernon Cavendish——"

"I saw him, my lord—a fine young nobleman as ever was."

"My niece, Lady Ernestina Dysart," continued the Marquis, frowning slightly at the compliment thus paid to his nephew.

"The lady who was so closely veiled, and who came in a hackney-coach, I believe?" observed Sampson.

"The same," replied the Marquis. "Then there was Miss Bathurst—and last of all, Mrs. Owen. I can swear that neither of these four could have had anything to do with the mysterious affair."

"Of course not," rejoined Sampson. "Well, we must leave the development of that mystery to time and chance. Has your lordship any farther commands?" inquired the Bow Street officer, rising to take his leave.

"None," said Lord Leveson: "only that you will accept this cheque for five hundred guineas," he added, tossing the slip of paper across the table.

Mr. Lawrence Sampson returned due acknowledgments for the bounty of the Marquis, and was about to take his departure, when recollecting something, he said, "I have to solicit that your lordship will give Mrs. Owen no information relative to the perfidy of her servant, inasmuch as I shall take that duty upon myself without delay."

"Be it so, Mr. Sampson," replied the nobleman.

The Bow Street officer then bowed and took his departure.

"Mrs. Bradshaw shall be mine!" exclaimed the Marquis, the instant the door closed behind Larry Sampson. "Her husband is either a venal or a desperate man—and she herself is no prude. Well, now that I hate Venetia Trelawney so thoroughly—so cordially—I abandon her to the Prince, and shall no doubt be enabled to console myself with Mrs. Bradshaw."

Thus musing, he rang the bell; and when the summons was answered by a page, he desired that his confidential valet might be sent to him immediately.

"Brockman," said the Marquis, when this individual made his appearance with a silver salver in his hand,—"go and tell Mrs. Gale that I desire to see her particularly in the course of the day—the sooner the better."

"Yes, my lord," answerd Brockman. "This letter has just arrived," he added, handing his noble master the missive upon the silver tray.

He then withdrew—and the nobleman, who instantaneously perceived the royal arms upon the seal and recognised the handwriting of the Prince Regent, proceeded to open the letter. Its contents ran as follow:—

"*Saturday, September 21st*, 1814.

"My dear Leveson,

"In offering you the vacant Garter, I am only recognising the many services which you have rendered to your country and to the King's Government by your unvarying support of our blessed Constitution and those excellent institutions under which the British people are happy, prosperous, free, and contented.

"Accept, my dearest Leveson, the affectionate regards of your's, &c.,

"GEORGE, P. R."

A little slip of paper, which was enclosed inside this letter, had fallen upon the carpet. Lord Leveson picked it up, and read as follows:—

"You rogue, you thought to get the better of me with Venetia. But it served me right for forgetting to send you the special promise of the Garter. However, my dear friend, we will not entertain any ill-will towards each other: Venetia prefers *me* and has punished *you*—that is enough. By the bye, do you see by the papers that the rascally lower orders are getting more and more discontented every day, and are holding meetings all over the country? Something *must* and *shall* be done. Besides, trade really seems horribly bad; and the country never was *less* prosperous or happy. Our institutions positively seem as if they were worn out: but I suppose they will last my time. Any news of the gossamer lady?"

"Well, I shall have the Garter after all!" exclaimed Leveson, rubbing his hands gleefully. "And now that I am on the track of the beauteous Mrs. Bradshaw, the Prince may keep his Venetia in welcome"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SATURDAY: OR, THE SIXTH SUITOR.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon—and Venetia Trelawney was again seated alone in her drawing-room, evidently expecting a visitor.

She was plainly but well dressed, in a style calculated to show off her beauty to its greatest advantage, and at the same time to prove that she trusted to no adventitious aids for the embellishment of her charms. No ornament was upon her hair, which shone in its own natural glory with a splendour that far outvied that of the brightest crown or gemmed tiara. Her low-bodied dress displayed her fine bust; and in her looks there was a gentle tremulousness mingled with a soft and stealing languor.

Presently a loud double knock at the front door startled her, although it was expected; and the colour deepened upon her cheeks—and her bosom palpitated rapidly—and she experienced some difficulty in regaining her self-possession by the time her staid and serious-looking domestic announced "Mr. Sackville."

"Well, Horace," said Venetia, advancing to receive him with the cordial welcome of previously existing acquaintanceship, or even of positive friendship: "and so you have availed yourself of *your* turn to favour me with your presence?" she added, with a smile that revealed her pearly teeth.

"Oh! I claim the privilege of my day," he cried gaily, as he pressed her hand: then taking a seat near her as she placed herself on the sofa, he observed, "This is *my* Saturday, you know—and therefore I have a right to pay you my homage at your own house. Recollect that this is the first time I have ever set foot within the walls of Acacia Cottage."

"And what do you think of my residence, Horace?" inquired Venetia.

"That it fully justifies the description already given me concerning it," responded the young gentleman. "But tell me candidly—did you expect that I should call upon you to-day?—and are you angry with me for doing so?"

"I *did* expect you, Horace—and I am *not* angry," returned Venetia, in a low and somewhat serious tone.

"But of all the six suitors," observed Sackville, gazing upon her earnestly and anxiously, "I am the only one who dares not plead his suit and talk to you of love!"

"Do you wish to speak upon that topic, Horace?" inquired Miss Trelawney, with a slight agitation visible in her manner and a gentle tremulousness perceptible in her voice.

"Who can know you—who can contemplate you—who can hear you, Venetia," exclaimed Horace, rapturously and passionately, "without loving you?"

"But *you*, Horace—you, of all men, to address me in this style!" said Venetia, with a profound sigh: then instantaneously brightening up, she turned upon him her glowing looks, now full of an expression of archness, exclaiming, "You are only playing your part as one of my six suitors: but you are well aware of all that has taken place——"

"Of course I know all, Venetia," interrupted Sackville, gazing upon her with a profound and mournful tenderness: "and *now* I wish that it had been otherwise! But you have triumphed, Venetia—you have triumphed proudly and grandly—and the Prince of Wales may now kneel at your feet. Yes—your charms have achieved all that was anticipated: and I have been an accessory to the gaining of this triumph on your part. But I am unhappy, Venetia——"

"And wherefore should you be unhappy, Horace?" asked Miss Trelawney, in a tone and with a look that encouraged him to proceed.

"Do you wish me to tell you the real truth, Venetia?" he inquired, his handsome eyes glittering with suspense.

"Yes—if you please," she responded, nervously: and the colour came and went upon her cheeks, as if she knew full well the revelation he was about to make.

"Then hear the truth from my lips, Venetia," he said: and gazing anxiously upon her as if to catch the first indication of the effect which his words were about to produce, whatever this effect might be, he exclaimed, "Beautiful creature, I love and adore you."

Although Miss Trelawney was fully prepared for this avowal, yet when it was made she trembled all over—the colour went and came in quick transitions upon her cheeks—and her bosom rose and fell with heavings equally rapid. She endeavoured to murmur something: but the words died upon her lips—and a large tear, bright as a dew-drop and glistening as a gem, trickled adown each damask cheek.

"Oh! you are not offended with me—you are not angry!" exclaimed Horace, in a joyous tone. "I was determined to come to you to-day and breathe in your ears the secret of my adoration—an adoration which is however perhaps no secret to you!

For you may have observed that I loved you, Venetia—yes, you must have discovered it, despite all my efforts to veil my thoughts——But why do you weep?" he asked suddenly, and in a voice of the most melting tenderness.

"Because I am unworthy of a virtuous love," replied Venetia, a deep sob convulsing her bosom. "Though pure and chaste as on the day of my birth—so far as the world reckons purity and chastity—yet is not my soul already polluted? Have I not systematically and deliberately——"

"Oh! let us not talk of that, Venetia!" exclaimed Horace, with a species of shudder. "If my love be not offensive—unwelcome—unacceptable——"

"But you know, Horace," interrupted Miss Trelawney, suddenly wiping the tear-drops from her countenance and regaining her self-possession, if not her composure,—"you know that I have gone too far to retreat—that I have embarked in this enterprise—that my destiny is as it were fixed——"

"Oh! fulfil that destiny, then, by all means, since you will," cried Horace, with impassioned tone and vehement manner; "but do not disdain my love! Be what you will—do what you choose—accomplish all you have undertaken—but spare one little corner of your heart wherein my image may find a place!"

"You would hate and despise me when the first transports of this love of your's were over!" said Venetia, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

"No—that were impossible!" exclaimed Sackville, impetuously. "Listen to me, Venetia—charming Venetia," he continued, with a voice of earnest entreaty. "You will become the mistress of the Prince—but you need not love him—you cannot love him! I know your character and have studied your disposition too well, to believe for a moment that you will ever entertain the slightest affection for that man. But if you can love me, I shall be happy—oh! supremely happy: yes—even while you are the mistress of another! You said just now that I should hate and despise you after a time when the tempest of my passion had subsided or its ardour was cooled down: but its intenseness will never diminish. I loved you the first moment I saw you—I have loved you ever since—I love you now,—yes, love you to distraction: and so far from loving you less, I shall if possible love you more and more. But it is *you* who will hate and despise *me* for cherishing this love under such circumstances: and yet all I ask is to be your slave—to be allowed to love you—to receive your smiles in return! And if it should be possible for you to love me also—Oh! then I would accept any degradation—any humiliation, rather than surrender that love of your's. Yes—joyfully, joyfully would I become your husband, if you would bestow your hand upon me—so that your reputation should be saved in the eyes of the world——"

"Oh! Horace," exclaimed Venetia, taking his hand and gazing tenderly upon him,—"this devoted love of your's is a gift which no woman can refuse! But have you well reflected upon all that you now tell me?"

"Well reflected, Venetia!" cried Horace, carrying her hand rapturously to his lips: "it has been my constant thought by day and my dream by night! I tell you that if you were already the mistress of the Prince, I should esteem myself happy in possessing your love—and honoured in obtaining your hand. This love of mine may be an infatuation—a madness—a frenzy: but it is not the less powerful—less profound—or less sincere on that account. Nor will it ever diminish, Venetia—Oh! never, never!"

"I know not how to answer you, Horace—or what to say," observed Miss Trelawney, still leaving her hand locked in his own, but casting down her eyes and blushing deeply. "I will not deceive you by saying that I have loved you as yet: nor do I mean to flatter you vainly when I declare that you are the only being I have ever yet seen whom I feel that I *can* love."

"Thanks, my dearest—my adored Venetia, for this avowal!" exclaimed Horace, catching her in his arms and straining her to his breast: then, as he held her thus locked in his embrace, he pressed his lips to her's—and inspired by the natural fervour of her temperament, she gave back the warm and impassioned kiss which he imprinted there. "Heavens! Venetia," murmured the young man as he strained her again and again with passionate ardour to his breast, "I can scarcely believe in my own happiness!—it appears to me a delicious dream! But you will be mine, Venetia—you will become my wife?—yes, even under existing circumstances——"

"But have we no one to consult in this matter, Horace?" inquired Venetia, gently disengaging herself from his arms, with the deep crimson upon her cheeks and the soft sensuousness in her melting eyes.

"A consent will not be refused, my angel, in *that* quarter!" returned Sackville. "What does it signify, so long as the design and the undertaking be carried out? And I have already declared—indeed, I promise again—that although I become your husband, I will not attempt any constraint in *that* respect! Ah! Venetia, is not this a proof of the ardent and profoundly sincere affection with which you have inspired me?"

"It is," murmured the lady: "it is! But I am still fearful that when once I am your wife—that being whose honour the fond husband guards so jealously——"

"Venetia, listen to me once again," interrupted Sackville, seriously but impressively. "The world would never have known greater happiness than I should experience were you to say to me, '*Horace, I abandon this enterprise and I consent to become your wife, even though our marriage should suddenly deprive us both of the means of existence and plunge us into the direst poverty.*' Because, were you thus to address me, I should tell you in return that though utterly dependent now upon another, I would work from morning to night to maintain you in comfort, if not in luxury. But I do not ask you to make so great a sacrifice for my sake. I am contented—nay, supremely happy—in receiving you as my wife, even with the conditions which I need not name attached to our union! Therefore, dearest Venetia, I do all this with my eyes open: I accept that destiny which will become mine when I make you my wife;—and I would sooner encounter the jeers and scorn of the world, than resign your hand! You see, then, that I am decided—that my mind is made up: and now will you promise to become my bride?"

"I will," answered Venetia, in a tone that was

scarcely audible: and her head drooped upon his breast.

Oh! with what impassioned rapture did the infatuated young man take that charming head between both his hands and cover it with kisses! Then gently forcing Venetia to look up, he lavished a thousand caresses upon her polished brow—her glowing cheeks—her charming mouth: but to no farther freedoms did the demonstration of his passion extend—to no sensual license did those burning caresses lead! His hand sought not to invade the treasures of her bosom: 'twas sufficient for him then to feel the rich volume of either firm and snowy globe heaving against his chest;—and Venetia could not do otherwise than contrast the delicate devotion of Horace Sackville with the frenzied longings and undisguised sensuousness of the Prince Regent.

For a long time did Miss Trelawney and her sixth suitor remain in tender and interesting discourse together. They talked upon many subjects—they reviewed all the circumstances under which they had first become acquainted with each other—they laid plans for the future—and they arranged that their bridal should take place as early as convenient.

When they separated it was past six o'clock in the evening: and Captain Tash remarked to his man Robin at the *Green Dragon* opposite, as they saw Horace Sackville leave Acacia Cottage, "Well, that is the longest visit that any gentleman has yet paid to Miss Trelawney!"

CHAPTER XL.

MRS. GALE.

It was about four in the afternoon that an elderly female, of matron-like appearance and well-dressed, presented herself at Leveson Mansion in Albemarle Street. She was evidently known to the domestics: for the hall-porter instantaneously admitted her without a word, and a page at once conducted her into the room where the Marquis was seated.

She looked one of those respectable, motherly women whom children would love and in whom inexperienced, artless girls would place implicit confidence. There was something uncommonly good-tempered in her smile and benevolent in her gaze,—something exceedingly unpretending, frank, and honest in her manner. Her apparel was neatness itself; and its material as well as her general demeanour indicated a gentlewoman in easy circumstances.

But how appearances may be deceptive! This female, with the kind and motherly air—with the unassuming blandness of manner—and with the look of unimpeachable respectability, was none other than a vile procuress. Her name was Gale: she possessed a handsome and well-furnished house in Soho Square;—and in that establishment she had a perfect harem of beauties whom she had decoyed into her meshes, and whom she sold to the aristocratic voluptuaries and wealthy profligates of the West End. Beneath that suavity of manner which she had so long assumed that it had become a part of her nature, she concealed a diabolical disposition. There was no infamy—no wickedness of which she was not capable: her plots and intrigues had carried desolation and despair into many a respectable family, and had proved the ruin of many a lovely girl. She had long been wedded to iniquity itself: but now, being its widow, as it were, she lived by involving others in its maze. Her perseverance in carrying out any scheme which she herself initiated, or which might be entrusted to her, was only equalled by her avarice in making the most of it either in the form of profit or reward. She was well known to all the rakes, roués, and voluptuaries about town: she was also a go-between for married ladies who required the succour of such a person;—and she had heaped up riches by means of her manifold iniquities.

Such was the woman whom the Marquis of Leveson had sent for in the morning, and who now came in obedience to the summons of one of her best and oldest patrons.

"Sit down, Mrs. Gale," said his lordship; "and listen to me attentively. But first tell me whether you have time and inclination to embark in a little enterprise for me."

"I have always time at your lordship's service," was the bland response; "and every inclination to devote it to your lordship's purposes."

"I expected no less favourable an answer from you," observed the nobleman. "Listen, then. At Beechey Manor, near Wandsworth, reside a certain Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw. The husband is an elderly man; and I have every reason to believe him an unprincipled scoundrel, who has already once trafficked in his wife's charms. She is younger than he, and exceedingly beautiful. This Mrs. Bradshaw I am determined to possess. But inasmuch as her husband is an intriguing, desperate, reckless fellow, he is quite capable of selling me his wife first and bringing an action for damages afterwards. Such a proceeding I am therefore anxious to avoid. In fact, I would sooner abandon the enterprise than place myself in the power of this Bradshaw. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, my lord," replied Mrs. Gale. "I can easily negotiate the affair without mentioning your lordship's name; and if I succeed, the interview can take place at my house, where the lady need not know who your lordship is, unless indeed she is already personally acquainted with you."

"I do not think she is, Mrs. Gale," observed Leveson: "because I never knew any one by the name of Bradshaw. To be sure, the name may be an assumed one: but this is a risk I must run. At all events, if the husband be not informed who the nobleman is that employs you, he can never obtain direct and positive evidence upon the subject Besides, you need not say that you are employed by a nobleman at all."

"Of course not, my lord," rejoined Mrs. Gale: "for if the matter did ever go into a court of justice, all the barristers in the world would not get *aye* out of me if I chose to answer *nay*—and as for being put upon my oath, I should not value such nonsense a single straw."

"You speak like a very sensible and discreet woman, as you are, my dear Mrs. Gale," said the Marquis of Leveson. "And now as to financial matters. I will give this Mr. Bradshaw a thousand guineas:—five hundred to be paid when he hands his wife into a hackney-coach, where you will be seated to receive her—and the other five hundred

to be paid to the lady herself on arriving at your abode,—to which, by the bye, you will have to take care that he does not follow you."

"Leave all this to me to manage, my lord," said Mrs. Gale.

"As to your own recompense," continued the Marquis, "I shall not utter a word upon the subject now; because you can trust to my generosity——"

"Don't mention the thing, my lord," exclaimed Mrs. Gale, appearing to be quite shocked. "It is a pleasure to serve your lordship in any way: and I shall do my best to succeed in this instance. Has your lordship any farther commands?"

"None, Mrs. Gale. But do not be in a hurry to depart. What news have you in your special sphere?—any particular scandal rife at the moment?"

"Nothing, my lord, that I am aware of," was the response.

"No charming importation from the country to Soho Square?" inquired the Marquis, significantly. "I know that you always have numerous watchful agents abroad, while you yourself are constantly on the look-out in London. By the bye, do you not recollect telling me some months ago of a charming creature whom you picked up in Grace-church Street?"

"To be sure I do!" exclaimed Mrs. Gale. "Ah! she was indeed a charming creature!—the loveliest angel that ever set foot in my house, I can assure your lordship. She had just been robbed of her purse when I met her in Grace-church Street, and was unable to return by the coach to Canterbury, or somewhere in Kent, whither she wanted to get back. Ah! she was indeed a splendid young woman!" added Mrs. Gale, in all the admiration of a loveliness which had left a deep impression upon her mind.

"What a loss I experienced, then?" exclaimed

the Marquis, in a tone of vexation. "But what has become of her? Who was the lucky dog——"

"Your lordship must not blame me for that loss which you thus deplore," observed the woman. "No sooner had I got the young lady safe at Soho Square, than I hurried off to Albemarle Street to report the circumstance: but your lordship, as you may remember, was ill in bed at the time ——"

"To be sure—to be sure," interrupted Leveson. "Ah! it was a great misfortune! But what became of her after all?"

"On leaving your lordship's abode, I recollected that there was another means of disposing of the young lady to advantage," continued Mrs. Gale: "and so I instantaneously availed myself of it. But I must not tell your lordship any more," she added, with one of her blandest smiles. "You know I never repeat tales out of school."

"Quite right, Mrs. Gale—quite right," exclaimed the Marquis. "If you chatted about others to me, I should expect you to chat about me to others. I like your discretion and applaud your prudence."

"There is one thing, however, my lord, which I don't mind mentioning and which regards another person," said Mrs. Gale: "and this is that the sneaking, unprincipled, dishonest fellow, Colonel Malpas, came and borrowed five hundred pounds of me six weeks ago—and I can't get a farthing back from him. I declared that I would expose him: and so now I have begun."

"It is too bad of him," observed the Marquis. "But this is not the only thing of a mean and shabby kind that I have heard about him within the last few days. He is evidently an unprincipled scoundrel—and I shall cut him. They say he has run through all his wife's fortune—the heiress of the retired butcher ——"

"Yes—and he and the Earl of Curzon are raising money together by all kinds of desperate means, I am told," added Mrs. Gale, who delighted in a bit of gossip, especially when it was mixed up with scandal. "At least, I hear that their joint bills and promissory notes are flying about in all directions in the City: and so I am afraid that I stand but a poor chance of getting back my five hundred pounds from Malpas. But I will lock him up in the Fleet or the Bench, before I have done with him."

"And is the Earl of Curzon really in difficulties?" exclaimed the Marquis oi Leveson.

"I tell your lordship what I have heard," answered Mrs. Gale. "In fact Malpas offered me a bill with the Earl's acceptance: but thinking it was only to gain time, I refused to take it."

"And yet Curzon received a good fortune with his wife," observed the Marquis. "By the bye, Mrs. Gale, she is a monstrous fine woman—a very fine woman! I can't exactly make her out. Sometimes I think she is all that is correct and even prudish—and at other times I have been led to form a contrary opinion. Have you ever seen her?"

"I have, my lord," was the reply. "She is a beautiful woman."

"And what is *your* opinion of her?" demanded the Marquis, emphatically.

"Oh! I really cannot say—I don't know," exclaimed Mrs. Gale: then, as the time-piece on the mantel struck five, she said, "I must be off. Indeed, I shall take a coach and ride over to Wandsworth at once. Perhaps I may see Mr. Bradshaw this evening. At all events, I shall go and endeavour to obtain an immediate interview with him."

"Do so," observed the Marquis: "for I am fearful that he may leave the country, as he has very recently been living in France."

Mrs. Gale then took her departure; and seeking the nearest hackney-coach stand, she entered a vehicle and ordered the driver to take her to Wandsworth. On arriving in that vicinage at about seven o'clock, she inquired where Beechey Manor was situated; and on gaining the requisite information, she alighted from the coach at the *Blue Lion*. Her object was to make certain little inquiries of the landlord or landlady previous to repairing to the Manor: but upon putting the first question, she was informed that Mr. Bradshaw was at that very moment drinking brandy-and-water in the parlour of the public-house. She also learnt that he was alone there: and without any hesitation she at once entered the parlour, having ordered some slight refreshment.

Seating herself in the room, and sipping the negus which was supplied her, she surveyed Mr. Bradshaw from the corner of her eye, her proceedings in delicate matters of this kind being much regulated by the view she took of the individual's character, as she judged of it by her skill in reading the human physiognomy. She accordingly beheld in Mr. Bradshaw a man on whose features dissipation had left their unmistakable marks; and in the lines of his countenance and its general expression she saw the worst passions and most vicious inclinations plainly indicated. But while making this furtive survey, the impression gradually stole into her mind that she had seen those features before—where or when, however, she could not recollect.

"It is a beautiful evening, sir," she said at length, by way of opening a conversation.

"It is," remarked Bradshaw, who was smoking a cigar: then, as he began to contemplate the woman with some degree of attention, he observed, "Pardon me, ma'am—but your features certainly are not unknown to me."

"And now I think of it, sir," she exclaimed, "I am sure that I have seen *you* before."

"Why, surely you must be Mrs. Gale of Soho Square!" he cried, the recognition flashing to his mind with the vividness of lightning.

"I am, sir," she answered, inwardly rejoicing at being thus claimed as an acquaintance by one with whom it was so desirable to get upon an immediate footing of intimacy. "And you are Mr. Bradshaw——"

"Ah! how did you know that?" he inquired, eyeing her suspiciously for a moment.

"Simply because the landlady at the bar, when she desired me to step in here to take my refreshment, observed that there was no one in the parlour but Mr. Bradshaw of the Manor:"—and Mrs. Gale gave this reply with an air of the utmost sincerity.

"Oh! that was it," observed Bradshaw, perfectly satisfied. "I know very well that when I frequented your house in Soho Square some years ago, I never gave any name at all: but it is a long, long time since I saw you last."

"It must be, sir," replied Mrs. Gale: "because I have only a dim recollection of you. And yet I

did recollect you, though," she added with one of her bland smiles.

"Well—are you still carrying on the old game?" he asked, chuckling significantly: and then he continued to smoke his cigar.

"Just the same, sir—just the same," responded the woman. "I shall be glad to see you up in the Square: my house is greatly altered——"

"Quite a palace, I dare say?" observed Bradshaw, with a laugh,

"Well—it is a nice comfortable place, sir," she replied. "I have made a little money—and what is more, Mr. Bradshaw, I know how to keep it."

"I wish the deuce I did," he exclaimed, abruptly. "My pockets are so infernally leaky—and then I have got the habit of shaking my elbow——"

"Of what, sir?" cried Mrs. Gale, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Why, of gambling—rattling the dice-box, I mean," was the answer. "I don't mind telling you all this, because I look upon you as an old acquaintance. I am staying up at the Manor just for the present—but only for a few days, I think: and then I shall be off to France again. I have got my wife with me: but her company is somewhat of the dullest at times—and so I stepped down here to the *Blue Lion* in the hope of meeting some one to chat to in the parlour. I was however all alone till you dropped in. But, by the bye, what on earth are you doing in this part of the world at such an hour?"

"Well, Mr. Bradshaw," replied the woman, assuming a mysterious air of confidence, "since you are good enough to treat me as an old acquaintance, I must not make a stranger of you. The fact is, I am engaged on a little enterprise which, if it succeed, will put a few hundreds into my pocket, and a good many hundreds into the pocket of some lucky girl, if I can only find just what I want."

"And what do you want, in the devil's name?" demanded Bradshaw, his curiosity excited by the mysterious, or rather incomprehensible response which he had just received: besides, he was always interested in any matter where money formed a portion of the topic,

"Well, sir," continued Mrs. Gale, drawing her chair nearer to the one in which he was seated, "it is the strangest adventure in the whole world—and yet not the first of the sort, either, that I've known or been engaged in. The truth is, my best patron is an elderly gentleman—a little older than you may be, sir—begging pardon for the allusion: and he is a terrible rake—a terrible rake! Well, sir, he came to me this morning, and said that he was quite wearied of all the conquests he had recently made—the old fool! I could scarcely help laughing in his face—and yet he is a very good-looking man, considering his age—and enormously rich—in fact one of the richest commoners in England."

"Well—and what did he want with you?" inquired Bradshaw: "to find him some new beauty to tempt his sated appetite and please his palled fancy?"

"Just so," returned Mrs. Gale. "But she must be a lady—a perfect lady in manners and speech as well as in appearance—and of course very beautiful. In fact, with the exception of these stipulations, he left the affair for me to manage as I choose: and hearing of a lovely creature who was reported to live at Wandsworth, I have been to inquire about her. But I find she has left with her husband—and now I am at my wit's end. It would have been a thousand guineas in her pocket—and from all I have heard, she was not so prudish as to have rejected the offer."

"A thousand guineas!" echoed Bradshaw. "A hundred you mean?"

"I mean what I said, sir," replied the artful woman, already confident that success awaited her. "A thousand guineas will this old fool give—and yet I ought not to speak disrespectfully of him, for it would be worth a couple of hundred guineas to me if I succeeded. But where to search for such a being——"

"And do you mean to tell me that this simpleton, whoever he is, will toss his money away in such a manner?" inquired Bradshaw.

"Why, sir, he is worth a hundred thousand a year," returned Mrs. Gale: "and being a bachelor, devoted to pleasure, he cares not how much he spends upon the gratification of his whims and phantasies."

"Well, there are such fools in the world—plenty of them," observed Bradshaw: then, with some little hesitation, he said, "It is very singular—but I think I know a lady who for such an amount might be induced to overcome her scruples——"

"Ah! my dear sir, if you could only put me in the way of success in this instance, I should be so thankful!" exclaimed the woman. "The strictest secrecy may be relied upon, as a matter of course——'

"And about the payment of the money?" said Bradshaw, his voice dropping to a low confidential tone.

"Oh! in any way most agreeable," replied Mrs. Gale. "Suppose that I was to fetch the lady in a coach, I would hand over half the amount at once on my own responsibility: and the other half should be presented to herself by the gentleman at my house, where the interview must take place."

"Will you allow me to help in the management of this affair?" demanded Bradshaw: "and I promise you that the lady whom I will introduce to you shall even exceed your expectations in every point. Beautiful—of elegant manners—fascinating and seductive when she chooses—young and well formed——"

"My dear sir, if you can really manage this matter as you say," interrupted Mrs. Gale, apparently thrown into an ecstacy of delight, "I not only accept your services, but shall be infinitely obliged into the bargain."

"Then let us consider the compact made," said Bradshaw. "Let me see—this is Saturday evening: shall we say Monday night at eight or nine o'clock, whichever you choose?"

"In what neighbourhood must I be to receive the lady?" asked Mrs. Gale.

"Why, to tell you the truth," was the response, "she is a friend of my wife's—a married woman, mind—but her husband is absent—in France, I believe—and she has been a little gay, but quite privately and secretly——"

"All these particulars I do not seek to know," interrupted Mrs. Gale. "The gentleman for whom I am acting will not ask her name—although he may communicate his own, if he is pleased with her and desires to see her again. This, however, I

must leave to his discretion and fancy. In a word, then, where am I to be on Monday night to receive the fair one?"

"In the lane leading up to the Manor," returned Bradshaw. "You will come in a hackney-coach or private carriage——"

"A hackney-coach," was the answer: "and I will be in the lane punctually at eight o'clock."

The bargain of infamy was thus concluded; and Mrs. Gale took leave of her confederate in the loathsome compact.

But ere she issued from the house, she stepped into the bar-parlour; and putting a couple of guineas into the landlady's hand, she said, "You need not tell Mr. Bradshaw that I made any inquiries concerning him just now. I shall be this way again shortly—and if I find that you have held your tongue in that respect, I will make you an additional present."

The landlady gave the required promise with cheerful alacrity, not only for herself but likewise for her husband: and Mrs. Gale, returning to the hackney-coach, rode back to London, infinitely rejoiced at the comparative facility with which she had thus far accomplished her purpose.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE BURGLARY.

It was half-past ten on Sunday morning; and Mrs. Owen issued forth from her mansion at Richmond, ostensibly to proceed to church as usual. This was the first Sunday for a long, long time that she went out alone, her daughters having hitherto been her companions. The present occasion was also destined to be characterised by another exception to the previous rule: for instead of going to church at all, she struck into a bye-lane along which she proceeded some distance. At length she observed a man leaning against a stile that communicated with the meadows; and she hastened to accost him.

"You are Mr. Sampson, I presume?" said Mrs. Owen, inquiringly.

"That is my name, ma'am," responded the Bow Street officer. "I need not ask whether I have the honour of speaking to Mrs. Owen?"

"I am here in pursuance of a letter which I received from you yesterday," continued the lady. "In that communication you speak of the absolute necessity of seeing me alone—you named this place for the appointment—and I have come accordingly."

"I moreover told you in the letter, ma'am," observed Sampson, "that my object was to give you a certain warning and to aid you in defeating a robbery that is contemplated."

"Yes—and you likewise bade me place the seal of silence upon my lips," said Mrs. Owen; "and neither by word nor sign indicate that I suspected anything in the presence of my domestics. I have complied with your suggestions to the very letter."

"Now, ma'am, don't be alarmed at what I am going to tell you," resumed Larry; "because we shall not only frustrate the intended mischief, but also entrap the concoctors. In plain terms, your house is to be broken into to-night——"

"Ah! the plate!" cried Mrs. Owen, with a start. "I have always been more or less uneasy since it came into my keeping!" she added, in a musing tone, but speaking aloud.

"Yes, ma'am—the object of the villains *is* the plate of which you speak," said Larry. "I believe it has the royal arms upon it——"

"On every article," exclaimed Mrs. Owen: "and I am responsible for its safety! Indeed, I would not for worlds lose it: the strangest suspicions might attach to myself——"

"You shall not lose it, ma'am," interrupted the Bow Street officer, in a tone that was calm but full of confidence: "that is to say, if you will follow my instructions and entrust the affair to my management."

"Of course I shall do so, with cheerfulness and gratitude, Mr. Sampson," replied the lady. "But tell me all about this mysterious business."

"There is a desperate villain under your roof, ma'am," said the officer: "and that villain is none other than your footman."

"My footman!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen, in astonishment. "Why, I had the best possible character with him from Lady Morthen——"

"It does not signify, ma'am," said Larry: "he is a villain—and in league with villains. Of *this* I am quite certain: but I need not trouble you with the details how I came to discover all these things. Persons in my sphere have strange ways of getting at strange knowledge. Let it be sufficient for you to learn that this night, at twelve o'clock, a burglary will be attempted in your house—a duplicate key has already been obtained for the safe containing the plate—and, in fact, everything is settled."

"But what do you propose to do, Mr. Sampson?" demanded Mrs. Owen, terribly frightened. "Had I not better send away all the plate at once?"

"No such thing, ma'am!" exclaimed Larry. "The villains must be caught in the act and surrendered up to justice. That is the only way to deal with them. You must really consent to be guided altogether by me——"

"I will, I will," said Mrs. Owen, trembling nervously. "The fact is, Mr. Sampson, the plate belongs to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, who is now on the Continent, as of course you well know. When she was going abroad, she was much pressed for money, and borrowed two thousand guineas of my friend, Lady Glenroy, with whom she left the plate as security. That is the real truth of the affair. But as Lady Glenroy was suddenly called to Scotland, to attend upon her husband who was taken ill at the family seat in the Highlands, she begged me to become the guardian of the plate, inasmuch as she could not possibly send it to her banker's without betraying the delicate nature of the transaction that originally consigned it to her hands. I have explained these circumstances to you, Mr. Sampson, to prove how sacred is the trust, and how seriously I should be compromised by the loss of such valuable property."

"The communication you have volunteered, ma'am," observed the officer, "shall be regarded as strictly confidential by me: and you need labour under no apprehension of the failure of the measures which I propose to adopt to save the plate from the villains who have their eye on it."

"And what are these measures?" inquired the lady, anxiously.

"I will explain myself, ma'am," returned the officer. "But first tell me at what o'clock your household usually retires for the night?"

"On a Sunday evening at half-past ten or eleven at the latest," was the answer.

"Very good, ma'am. Now, this evening please to make it half-past ten," continued Sampson; "and of course the footman will retire to his own chamber at the same time. This he will naturally do to avoid suspicion. But at eleven o'clock you must be kind enough to steal down from your apartment and open the door — either front or back, whichever there is the least chance of the fellow's overhearing——"

"The front let it be," said Mrs. Owen. "He sleeps at the back of the house."

"Well and good, ma'am: and then I and my men will creep into the dwelling—and you must hide us in some convenient place as near the pantry as possible. Let it be the cellar, if you like——"

"I understand," interrupted Mrs. Owen; "and everything you suggest shall be duly attended to."

"Then I have nothing more to say at present, ma'am," observed the Bow Street Officer.

They now separated—and Mrs. Owen went and called upon a female friend whom she was certain of finding at home, the lady being an invalid. In her company Mrs. Owen whiled away the time until she saw the people returning home from church; and then she retraced her way to her own dwelling. By this little stratagem on her part, the footman could entertain no suspicion that she herself had been otherwise employed than in the usual manner on the Sunday morning.

The hours passed — evening came: and the nearer the momentous period approached, the more nervous did Mrs. Owen feel. But she veiled her excited feelings under a look of perfect composure; and John the footman suspected nothing.

At half-past ten o'clock she rang the parlour-bell and ordered her maid to attend upon her. This was the signal for the retirement of the household to rest; and as Mrs. Owen was always in the habit of assuring herself that the doors were properly secured—especially since the royal plate had been entrusted to her care—she was always the last to withdraw for the night. She therefore had an opportunity of seeing that the footman ascended to his room as usual; and in order to lull him the more completely into a false security, she observed as he passed her in the hall, that she should require the carriage to be in readiness immediately after breakfast in the morning.

The footman made a suitable answer, and continued his way up-stairs, chuckling in his sleeve at what he supposed to be a proof of the utter absence of any suspicion on the part of his mistress. The coachman—the cook—the housemaid, also went up to their rooms; and then Mrs. Owen proceeded to her chamber, followed by her abigail. This dependant she however speedily dismissed for the night: and then, enveloping herself in a wrapper, she sate down to wait until eleven o'clock.

A train of no very pleasurable reflections now began to pass through her mind. She was beneath the same roof with a consummate villain who was already meditating one crime, and who probably would not scruple to commit a deed more heinous still if he had any reason to fancy that he was suspected or that his safety was endangered. Her own murder might even enter into the compass of his designs: the hour for the burglary might be earlier than Sampson imagined—it might have been altered by the conspirators—and while descending the stairs to admit the officers, she might meet the villains and become their victim. All these reflections traversed her imagination, till her very chamber appeared to be peopled with the objects of terror which she thus conjured up, and which thrust forth their phantom faces from every nook and corner, and from behind every curtain and article of furniture.

But all was still throughout the dwelling: and presently her watch informed her that it was eleven o'clock. Holding the taper in one hand and her shoes in another, she issued noiselessly forth from her chamber, and crept as silently down the stairs. The shadow upon the wall terrified her: every instant she looked shudderingly round, fearful of being struck by some murderous hand from behind her back. But her apprehensions were groundless: and opening the street door, she gave admission to Mr. Lawrence Sampson, who was closely followed by half-a-dozen of his subordinate constables.

An immense load was now suddenly lifted from Mrs. Owen's mind; and she felt as if she had all in a moment been transferred from a predicament of appalling peril to a state of complete security. The front-door was closed as noiselessly as it had been opened; and she conducted the officers down into the lower premises, where they ensconced themselves in a large closet underneath the kitchen-stairs, and used for keeping fire-wood. Mrs. Owen then retraced her steps with the utmost caution to her own chamber, which she succeeded in reaching unmolested: and, locking the door, she sat down to await the result of the adventure.

We will now direct the reader's attention to the footman, who was also sitting up and waiting in his own room at the top of the house. He had provided himself with a bottle of his mistress's wine, which he was drinking at his ease, little suspecting the trap that had been set to ensnare him. So noiselessly had Mrs. Owen's proceedings been conducted, and so carefully had the constables entered the mansion, that not the slightest sound of an unusual character reached the ears of John as he sate discussing the fine old Port in his attic.

Lulled into complete security, he thus passed the time until within a few minutes of twelve o'clock. He then rose from his seat—assured himself that he had the duplicate key safe in his pocket—and, carrying his shoes in his hand, gently stole down stairs. Pausing to listen at Mrs. Owen's door, he found that all was still: and, chuckling with the hope of a rich booty, he continued his way to the premises below. Lighting a candle,—for he had left his own in his room,—he put on his shoes and at once opened the door of the back kitchen. The Hangman immediately entered the place: the door was closed again;—and the two villains passed into the pantry adjoining.

"You don't think the old woman suspects anything?" inquired Coffin, in a subdued whisper.

"Not a bit of it, Dan'el," was the answer, given

in an equally low tone. "She told me as she went up to bed, that the carriage was to be ready immediately after breakfast to-morrow morning. But I fancy she'll be in no humour to go out riding—unless it is to Bow Street to lodge an information."

"Does she look every morning to see that the plate is safe, then?" asked Coffin.

"Very often—and generally at the beginning of the week. But come along—we won't waste time in chattering. Have you got the bag?"

"Yes—here it is," replied the Hangman, producing a sack from under his thick coat. "I've spoke to Old Jeremy, too—and he's to have his furnace blazing and his melting-pot ready at five in the morning: but I shall be with him long before that, I hope. Three hours are enough——"

"Are you going to pad it, then?" inquired John, as he put the key into the lock of the iron safe.

"To be sure—all across the fields," answered the Hangman. "You don't think I'd have a vehicle loitering about to excite suspicion. Not I indeed! But come—open that door—and let us catch a glimpse of the pretty things inside."

The footman accordingly opened the safe: but no sooner had the massive door grated on its hinges, when there was a sudden rush of several men through the back kitchen—and in the twinkling of an eye the pantry was invaded by the constables.

A terrible imprecation burst from the lips of the Hangman as he recognised Larry Sampson and his official posse: while a groan of horror indicated the feelings of the guilty footman.

"Take that, you scoundrel!" ejaculated Daniel Coffin, levelling a pistol at Sampson as this redoubtable officer seized upon the livery-servant.

But the ball, missing him for whom it was intended, shot the wretched footman through the heart: and with one wild cry, he sprang up and then fell dead at Sampson's feet.

Quick as lightning, and with the desperate strength of a giant, the Hangman burst away from the constables who seized upon him: and rushing forth from the pantry, he bounded through the back kitchen. The officers were at his heels in a moment: but he had just time to bang the door in their face and draw the bolt. Then darting up the stairs, he reached the front door of the house; and as he unchained it, he heard the officers break open the one which he had bolted down below. It was neck or nothing: but he threw open the front door—seized the key—locked it outside—and fled precipitately.

The three or four constables who had pursued him, hearing him lock the front door, rushed into the dining-room, tore open the shutters, raised the window, and dashed through it in chase of the fugitive. The night was clear: and they caught a glimpse of him as he turned out of the main road into the fields at a little distance. On they sped: again they beheld him—and two or three pistols were instantaneously discharged at him as he ran madly on. But his speed relaxed not: and the balls had evidently taken no effect. Another pistol was fired—then another: and still the Hangman pursued his desperate way, unhurt and unscathed by the winged bullets.

The pursuit now lay across a wide open field, shelving slightly towards the Thames; and a high hedge bounded it at the extremity in the direction of which the Hangman was flying. The constables were advancing diagonally across the field—so that if the fugitive should find the hedge impassable, his retreat would be effectually cut off. Another minute would, to all appearances, decide the matter.

With unrelaxing speed, but fearful pantings, Daniel Coffin skimmed over the meadow: and now the hedge was reached. He glanced behind him for an instant—and his pursuers were still fifty yards distant. He sprang upon the bank where the hedge grew—he looked over the thick barrier—and on the other side was a black ditch, evidently choked with mud, and too wide to enable him to leap it.

"Better be drowned than suffocated!" was the rapid thought which darted through the brain of the desperate man: and furiously he dashed towards the river.

The constables were almost instantaneously at his heels: that delay at the hedge had diminished the interval between the pursuers and the pursued.

"We have got him now!" cried one of the officers.

"No such thing—he's making for the Thames!" said another: then, raising his voice, he exclaimed, "Dan'el you fool, you'll be drowned!"

But scarcely was the terrible warning uttered—and while it was still ringing in the cold, crisp night-air—the Hangman plunged desperately into the river.

The next moment the constables were upon the bank of the Thames: but the tide was running strong with the ebb—and Daniel Coffin was already out of sight.

"There's an end of Jack Ketch!" exclaimed one of the constables, as they all fruitlessly strained their eyes to see if they could catch a glimpse of him appearing anywhere upon the surface of the river: for the hedge and the black ditch prevented them from hastening any farther along the bank.

"Yes—he's done for," observed another of the officers: and they then retraced their way to Mrs. Owen's mansion to report the catastrophe.

Meantime the entire household had been alarmed by the report of a pistol—the violent banging of the street-door—and the rush of the constables through the hall into the dining-room. Mrs. Owen was the first to descend: and in a few moments the coachman and the female domestics, all half-dressed, were hastening from their rooms to learn what had happened. The tale was soon told: an attempt at robbery—the flight of the burglar—and the death of his accomplice, John the footman!

The guilty wretch was indeed no more: it was evidently useless to summon medical assistance—for he was stone dead. There was some hysterical demonstration amongst the females—especially Mrs. Owen's lady's-maid, whom John had courted: but their terrors were dissipated when they found that all danger from the criminals was past, and that the Bow Street officers were in the house.

Soon afterwards the constables who had been in pursuit of Daniel Coffin, returned with an account of the result: and the impression naturally was that the villain had met his doom in the depths of the Thames.

"Unless," thought Larry Sampson to himself, "he should escape as providentially as I did from the ditch at the Folly Bridges: but that is scarcely probable!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

BEECHEY MANOR.

It was about two o'clock in the morning—a couple of hours afrer the burglarious attempt at Mrs. Owen's house—when Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw were aroused from their sleep at Beechey Manor, by a loud knocking at the front door.

"By Jove! there are the officers to take me!" cried Bradshaw, starting up in alarm: and springing from the bed, he hastened to huddle on some clothing as well as he could in the dark.

"But wherefore should you fear, since you possess that paper?" inquired his wife, who was nevertheless trembling and shivering with terror.

"Oh! because one always wants to put off an evil day as long as possible," returned her husband, impatiently. "This is cursed provoking—just as I have got a little business in hand, of which I meant to speak to you to-morrow——But there is the knocking again."

"What shall I do? Can you not escape?" asked Mrs. Bradshaw, anxiously.

"I'll try. Open the window—say I am not at home—gone to France—anything—only be quick—and I will hide myself somewhere. They are sure to search the house."

This dialogue scarcely occupied half a minute, during which the knocking was however continued impatiently; and as Mrs. Bradshaw opened the window, it struck her husband that the officers of justice would not present themselves with quite so much fracas—unless, indeed, they had surrounded the Manor, of which he was fearful. He however remained to hear what passed between his wife and whomsoever the person or persons might be that were knocking at the door.

"Who is there?" asked Mrs. Bradshaw, looking forth from the window: but the night—or rather morning—was now pitch dark, and she could distinguish nothing.

"Me—a friend of your's and your husband's," replied a voice, which seemed not altogether unknown to the lady: but still she could not identify it.

"Ah! I know who it is," exclaimed her husband, not so much at fault in this respect. "It's no officer. Here—stand out of the way—go to bed again—and leave me to manage the matter." Then, taking his wife's place at the window, he said to the person below, "Wait an instant—and I will come down."

Having thus spoken, he closed the window, struck a light, and quitted the room.

But Mrs. Bradshaw did not immediately return to the warm couch from which she had been startled. The incident filled her with vague and unknown alarms: and gently opening the chamber-door which her husband had closed behind him, she listened on the landing with suspended breath. She heard the front door open and her husband exchange a few hasty words with some man: but she could not catch a syllable of what they said. Neither was she yet able to recollect where she had heard the latter's voice before. The front-door was shut again—the man had entered the house—and Bradshaw was conducting him up-stairs.

What on earth could this mean? Trembling with a terror that increased upon her, the lady retreated into her chamber—closed the door cautiously—and got into bed. But still she listened attentively: and she heard her husband conduct the visitor into another bed-room on the same floor as her own. In a few moments he made his appearance with the candle in his hand—and she instantaneously perceived, as the light played flickeringly upon his countenance, that he was struggling to subdue or conceal emotions of annoyance and extreme dissatisfaction, although perhaps not of positive alarm.

"What is the matter? and who is he?" demanded Mrs. Bradshaw, anxiously.

"Oh! nothing—only a friend who has escaped from the Sheriff's officers," was the reply. "Where are the keys of the sideboard? He wants some brandy—being half dead with the cold."

"There—on the mantel," said Mrs. Bradshaw, very far from being satisfied with the answers she had received. "But who is this person? Do I know him? He said he was a friend of mine and your's—and his voice is familiar."

"To be sure—it's Jones—Mr. Jones—don't you recollect him?" exclaimed her husband, impatiently, as he took the keys from the mantel. "But I will tell you all about it presently:"—and he again hurried from the room.

Once more, too, did Mrs. Bradshaw get up and listen. But this time it was only at the chamber-door, which she did not dare open again, because her husband was moving about the house with the light in his hand. She heard him go into the dining-room: then he descended into the lower premises—and in a few minutes he came up-stairs again. A noise as of coals falling upon the landing, made her aware that he was going to light a fire in the room to which he had previously shown the visitor, and which he likewise now re-entered. He shut the door of that chamber behind him—and Mrs. Bradshaw went back to bed.

But she was still less satisfied and more alarmed than ever. Not for a moment did she believe the story of the escape from the Sheriff's officers: and she was confident that the name of *Jones* was a mere invention of the moment. There was some deep mystery—some disagreeable secret, in the knowledge of which she was evidently to be no participatrix. But what could it be?—what could it all mean? This unseasonable arrival at the Manor—the impatience of the summons for admission, as if the visitor well knew that his demand for an asylum would not be rejected—the attentions now shown him by Bradshaw, who was the last man in the world to allow himself to be put out of the way for anybody—and then the vexation and annoyance which were visibly depicted upon his countenance when he came to fetch the keys,—all these details constituted a mystery that filled the unhappy lady with the acutest alarms.

"O my God!" she murmured to herself, in the bitterness of her spirit and the darkness of her chamber: "to lead such a life as this, is one unvarying series of exquisite tortures! It maddens

me—my God! it maddens me! I will not endure it—I will not submit to it! No—by heaven! I will adopt some course——But, ah! that secret—that awful secret!"

And as if stricken with a mortal consternation by the effect of some appalling reminiscence, she suddenly stopped short in her musings and became still and motionless with despair. Even the very tide of her thoughts was frozen, congealing into all the horrors which at the moment filled them, and thus remaining present to her numbed imagination which could neither retreat from them nor outstrip them.

In this state she lay for a few minutes, until tears came to her relief and broke up the ice-bound stagnation of her soul. Then she gave free vent to her reflections again; and they soon flowed into the same channel as at first.

"Yes—I will do something to release myself from this horrible condition of existence," she murmured. "It will kill me—it is killing me already! To be dragged through the mire by the man whom I once loved so tenderly and for whose sake I sacrificed so much—O heaven! it is dreadful—dreadful! And this love of mine is rapidly turning to hate—it will soon become a longing for revenge! Yes—I will seek to emancipate myself from this abhorrent thraldom—I will even become the mistress of some one who will treat me kindly, rather than live as the wife of this man whose conduct is so brutal!"

Here the current of the unhappy lady's musings was broken by the return of her husband, who immediately extinguished the candle and lay down again by the side of his beauteous but afflicted wife.

"Now will you condescend to tell me what all this means?" she said, in a voice which indicated a firm resolve to ascertain the real truth and not be satisfied with mere evasions and palpable subterfuges.

"Well, haven't I already told you that it is my friend Mr. Jones, who is in some little trouble about debts and Sheriff's officers?" exclaimed Bradshaw, with brutal abruptness. "He was perished with cold—and so I was obliged to make him a fire to warm him, and get him hot brandy and water——"

"And where does this Mr. Jones live?" inquired the lady, with that gentle and subdued sarcasm in her voice that showed how utterly she discredited the tale that was thus told her.

"Somewhere in Pall Mall or St. James's Street, I forget which," returned Bradshaw: then, not choosing to perceive, or rather to notice his wife's ironical manner, inasmuch as it did not suit his purpose to pick a quarrel with her on the eve of broaching his infamous arrangement with Mrs. Gale, he said, "But we will talk more about the affair in the morning. You must be sleepy now——"

"Not at all," interrupted his wife.

"Well, I am then," he rejoined abruptly: and she did not dare speak another word.

They arose in the morning at the usual hour; and Bradshaw hurried into his dressing-room, evidently to avoid further explanations with his wife concerning the presence of the mysterious Mr. Jones at the Manor. On descending to the breakfast-parlour she inquired of her husband whether Mr. Jones purposed to join them at the repast but her voice was full of satire and her looks expressive of incredulity.

"Now I tell you what it is, madam," said Bradshaw, turning abruptly round upon her, so that she started as if fearful that he was about to strike her. "I don't like this bantering humour of your's—and I will not put up with it. The person in the house is a friend of mine: and he is in difficulties. If he chooses to call himself Jones, or Smith, or Robinson, or anything else, it is nothing to you. He will probably remain here a few days: but he will keep his own chamber—and therefore you need not expect any intrusion upon your privacy. I will attend upon him myself: and so there is an end of the matter."

"But is this just—is it generous?" exclaimed Mrs. Bradshaw, the tears trickling down her cheeks. "Am I to be compelled to live beneath the same roof with a person who does not even dare quit his apartment?—and can I believe that pecuniary difficulties alone force him thus to dwell in solitude and seclusion?"

"In one word, madam," demanded Bradshaw, fiercely, "do you want to quarrel with me? If so, speak out frankly—and we can soon ascertain who will get worst off in the conflict of open warfare," he added, with a diabolical significancy in his looks.

"Let us be at peace, then, for God's sake!" exclaimed the unhappy woman, recoiling in horror from the deep meaning expressed upon her husband's features.

Thus baffled, defeated, and crushed beneath the dark menaces conveyed in Bradshaw's looks and words, the afflicted lady took refuge in silence and resigned herself to endure for the present all the tyranny and cruelty of which he might choose to make her the victim. For not even her great beauty—the extraordinary seductiveness of her personal attractions—her musical voice and her imploring looks, had any influence to move the stony heart of that dreadful man. Again, however, did the resolve spring up in her mind to seek the first opportunity of emancipating herself from this wretched thraldom: and again did she feel that the hatred, which had already supplanted her love, was fast verging towards a longing for revenge.

So soon as she had prepared the breakfast, Bradshaw placed a cup of tea, some bread, butter, and cold meat, upon a small tray, which he carried up to Mr. Jones's chamber. During his temporary absence from the parlour, old Mrs. Underdown entered to bring a dish of broiled ham; and she inquired whether anybody had arrived at the Manor during the night. Mrs. Bradshaw gave some explanations to allay the old woman's curiosity; and soon after the latter had retired, Bradshaw came back to the parlour, where he sate down to eat his breakfast.

For some time a profound silence was maintained between the husband and the wife: but at last, so soon as the former had eaten and drunk as much as he cared for, he pushed away his plate, exclaiming, "Well, a plentiful meal puts a person in a good humour, notwithstanding all things."

His wife, who thoroughly understood her husband's character, saw that this observation was the prelude towards the revelation of some new scheme or design on his part: and she then recalled to recollection the remark he had made, when they were aroused at two in the morning, relative to a little business of which he purposed to speak to her. But she said nothing, although her curiosity was already excited.

"Do you know," continued Bradshaw, "I am thinking that it would be better for us to return to France—or go to Italy—rather than stay in this country?"

"I am wearied of the life I am leading here, as you may well imagine," said the lady, with a profound sigh. "Not a single soul to speak to—not an acquaintance or a friend to visit me—cooped up in this lonely, desolate house——"

"I know it all—I know it all," interrupted her husband: "and I am really sorry for you. Ah! you may look astonished—but I *am* sorry: because a handsome woman like you must feel this unpleasant position. Well, then, shall we go abroad once more?"

"Yes—I should prefer it," was the immediate response.

"But I can't think of leaving England with the money we now have at our disposal," continued Bradshaw.

"You have plenty," exclaimed his wife: "at least you ought to have."

"Well, I have got sixteen or seventeen hundred pounds," said Bradshaw. "But I must make it up three thousand—or else I won't move an inch till I do."

"And how do you propose to raise the difference?" asked his wife. "I see that you have some plan in your head—and you may as well explain it without farther circumlocution."

"But if you can assist me in it, will you do so?" inquired Bradshaw. "Come—say yes—be a good girl—and I take heaven to witness that I will never quarrel with you again, unless you provoke me first."

"How often have you said the same thing!" observed Mrs. Bradshaw, with another deep sigh. "But no matter! Tell me what project you have now in your mind—and I will give you my answer at once."

"You can get a thousand guineas if you like," said her husband, significantly, "before you are twenty-four hours older.

"And in what manner?" she demanded, the blood instantaneously gushing to her countenance, and not only mantling to her forehead, but also descending to her neck and bosom which the morning wrapper, negligently thrown on, revealed in all the luxuriance of its voluptuous fulness.

"You already seem amazed," observed Bradshaw, as he perceived that tell-tale glow. "But what on earth should you be vexed for? You gave yourself up to a certain individual for love—you did the same to another in order to procure that document for me—and you may as well do it once more, to a third person who will give you gold."

"And this, then," said the lady, the blush deepening upon her cheeks, her brow, and her neck, "is the scheme which you have devised to augment the amount at present in your hands?"

"I don't know any other way of procuring funds just at this moment," returned Bradshaw, curtly: "unless I go out upon the highway—or else rob a church," he added, with a brutal chuckle.

"And pray, sir," inquired the lady, still with an unnatural calmness, "how do you propose to replenish your purse when this amount has disappeared? Is it your intention always to live henceforth by the prostitution of your wife?"

"By Jove! it was not I who first made you go astray," exclaimed Bradshaw, hotly: "and since you did it for your own amusement, you ought not to be so squeamish when it is for our mutual profit. In plain terms," he continued, perceiving that the storm was about to burst, and hastening to anticipate its violence by getting up a counter-tempest on his own part,—"in plain terms, I ask you to do me this favour—it is the last time I will ever think of such a thing—and your compliance shall be the condition of eternal peace between us. If you refuse, then war—war to the knife—and I shall open the campaign by digging up the corpse——"

"Hush!—silence!—enough!" ejaculated Mrs. Bradshaw, hysterically: then covering her face with her hands, she threw herself back in the chair and remained for upwards of a minute buried in profound reflection.

But her husband had no pity—no remorse—no shame: no—not even when his look rested upon those fair white hands, with their long tapering fingers and their rosy pellucid nails—nor when he thought of the ravishing beauty of that face which those delicate hands now concealed—nor when his eyes wandered slowly over the fine proportions of that form whose luxuriant contours the negligent wrapper not only developed but partially exposed—nor when he beheld the exquisitely shaped foot that rested upon the ottoman, and the well-turned ankle which the drapery, slightly drawn up by his wife's attitude, left revealed. Her beauty moved him not: he was sated with it—and all he thought of, was how to render it a marketable commodity. Oh! the villany—the atrocity—the infamy of that man!

Slowly, at the expiration of a minute, did Mrs. Bradshaw remove her hands from her countenance: and now the colour had all fled from her cheeks—and her face was as pale as marble.

"How came you to hear of anything in the form of what you have proposed to me?" she inquired, in a low deep voice.

"I will be candid with you," returned Bradshaw: and he circumstantially related all the particulars of his interview with Mrs. Gale on the Saturday evening—embellishing his narrative so far, however, by drawing upon his fancy for a most flattering description of the gentleman by whom Mrs. Gale was employed, and whom he represented to be young, handsome as Apollo, rich as Crœsus, and generous as Timon ere this famous personage became a man-hater. Knowing full well the fervid temperament and sensual disposition of his wife, Bradshaw artfully drew a powerful description of the personal graces of the unknown gentleman—assuring her that Mrs. Gale had furnished him with all these particulars.

Mrs. Bradshaw listened attentively: but she was too profoundly unhappy for her imagination to be excited by this appeal to her voluptuous passions. She listened, however—and with an increasing interest too: for the thought grew stronger and stronger in her mind that if this gentleman were so liberal in disposition, so fascinating in manners, so engaging in person, and so fortunate in his pecuniary circumstances, it would be far better to become his loved and cherished mistress than drag on a life of wretchedness, suffering, and constant tribulation as the consort of Bradshaw. She pictured to herself the possibility of playing off the artillery of her fascinations and the witchery of her seductiveness in such a manner as to enthral the heart of this young and susceptible unknown; and she calculated that if she did thus succeed in her aim, a pension would readily compensate Mr. Bradshaw for her loss!

All these things did she revolve in her mind as her husband proceeded with his glowing description of the unknown gentleman: and when he had concluded, she said in a low voice, and with an appearance as if it cost her an immense effort to give her consent, "Be it as you desire: I will keep the appointment you have made for me!"

Bradshaw was delighted—and, with the disgustingly sycophantic coaxing and wheedling of such a disposition as his, he lavished the kindest expressions and the most tender promises upon his wife. But she paid little regard to him—and remained absorbed in her own reflections.

The day passed, Bradshaw keeping in-doors and spending some of the time with his friend Mr. Jones, who kept entirely to his chamber. When dinner was served in the parlour, Bradshaw took him up a tray as he had done in the morning with the breakfast: and the same attention was repeated at tea-time. Mrs. Bradshaw made no farther allusion to Mr. Jones: her thoughts were intent upon her hoped-for emancipation from her husband's tyranny;—and being sanguine in carrying out her views, she ceased to trouble herself about his affairs.

At length the hour drew near for the appointment with Mrs. Gale; and Mrs. Bradshaw, repairing to her chamber, took the utmost pains with her toilette. She was resolved to render herself as enchanting—as fascinating—as seductive as possible: she accordingly arranged her hair in the most becoming style, and chose a dress which displayed her charms to the greatest advantage. Although deriving but little succour from old Mrs. Underdown, who attended as her tire-woman, she managed to get through the details of this elabo-

rate toilette with complete success: and the parting look which she threw at herself in the mirror, brought a smile of triumph to her charming lips.

Having put on a cloak and bonnet, she descended to the parlour, where her husband was anxiously awaiting her. In order to flatter and put her into as good a humour as possible, he passed some high encomia upon her beauty—that beauty the enjoyment of which he was about to sell to another!

Issuing forth from the Manor, Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw proceeded along the lane, till they reached the spot where a hackney-coach was already waiting. Mrs. Gale was inside: but she descended, ostensibly for the purpose of paying all possible civility to the lady, but in reality to catch a glimpse of her countenance by the moon-light. Mrs. Bradshaw instantaneouly divined her intention, and threw back her veil. An ejaculation of joy burst from the woman's lips: and this expression of unfeigned satisfaction on her part struck deep into the lady's soul as a presage of success in the design which she had formed with regard to the gentleman she was about to meet.

"Mind and tell her that he is young and handsome—and leave the rest to chance," were the words which Bradshaw hurriedly whispered in Mrs. Gale's ears, as his wife ascended the steps of the vehicle.

The woman gave a nod of intelligence, and put a purse into the hand of Bradshaw, who felt by the touch that it contained notes and gold. Mrs. Gale then beckoned him away: and when he was a little distance up the lane, she entered the vehicle, which immediately drove away.

Some time elapsed before Mrs. Bradshaw could induce herself to open a conversation with the procuress seated by her side, and for whom she entertained an instinctive loathing: but at length she did volunteer some remark—and, the discourse being fairly entered upon, she put some questions relative to the gentleman she was about to meet. Mrs. Gale launched out into the most fervid eulogiums upon his elegant manners, his liberal disposition, and his handsome appearance: and she also expatiated upon his wealth and possessions. The subject of his age was not mentioned: but Mrs. Gale, when pressed relative to his name, positively declared that she was not at liberty to mention it. She however observed that he was unmarried, and volunteered a hint that no doubt the lady (for she affected not to know it was Mrs. Bradshaw herself) might establish a close intimacy with him if she should feel so inclined. This remark was not lost upon the frail fair one, who received it as another harbinger of success in the design which she had formed.

It was about half-past nine when the hackney-coach stopped at Mrs. Gale's house in Soho Square. Mrs. Bradshaw drew down her veil, and was immediately conducted by the woman into a handsomely-furnished chamber, where she laid aside her bonnet and cloak, and arranged her hair. Mrs. Gale, who was now able to contemplate her by a light more powerful than that of the moon, was perfectly astonished by her extreme beauty, and became lavish in her adulatory remarks. In fine, everything appeared to promise Mrs. Bradshaw a triumphant success; and, feeling as if she were already emancipated from the tyranny of her husband, she grew radiant with smiles and literally beaming with the transcendent light of her loveliness.

Mrs. Gale conducted her from the chamber, across the landing outside: and, throwing open the door of a splendid apartment opposite, requested her to enter. Mrs. Bradshaw accordingly advanced into the room—the door closed behind her—and an ejaculation of horror burst from her lips as she found herself in the presence of the Marquis of Leveson.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE UNCLE AND NIECE.

"ERNESTINA!" exclaimed the Marquis, staggering as if suddenly struck by a hammer: "in the name of heaven what brings you hither? Oh! I dare not—dare not think for a moment——And yet, my God! it must be so!"

The nobleman sank upon a seat—covered his face with his hands—and wept like a child. The whole truth was revealed to him all in a moment: it was his niece who had played the meretricious part with the Prince of Wales—his niece who was the heroine of the mystic adventure at Beechey Manor on the preceding Monday night—his niece who had deposited the pocket-book in the vase at his mansion on the memorable Wednesday! And now also it was his niece—his own beautiful, loved niece—the only being in the world that he really cared for—who had consented to sell her charms for gold, and who had come thither expecting to be received in the embrace of a paramour! Vile, profligate, and unprincipled as the Marquis of Leveson was, all these circumstances fell upon him with crushing and overwhelming force—striking him as it were blow upon blow, as every detail in the train of incidents developed itself in hurried succession to his understanding.

And Ernestina—the wretched, guilty, shame-stricken Ernestina,—Oh! never did Indian scalping knife—never did the torture of rack or slow fire, inflict such excruciating anguish as that which she now endured as she threw herself upon her knees at her uncle's feet, and burst into a flood of the bitterest weeping. And, Ah! if scalding tears could furrow the cheeks and sear the flesh, all her beauty would have been annihilated in a moment by those torrents that now rained hot as molten lead from the eyes which they almost blinded: and never did that superb bosom heave and fall so rapidly or so violently in the transports of love, as it now did in the tortures of immitigable anguish!

For some minutes did the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Ernestina Dysart thus give way to their afflictions: but when the violence of their feelings had partially subsided, they looked each other in the face with an exceeding mournfulness and a profound humiliation.

"This is no place for us to linger in, Ernestina," exclaimed the nobleman, suddenly remembering where they were: and starting up, he said, "Dry your tears—assume as composed a look as you can—and let not the woman of the house suspect that anything is amiss."

He then rang the bell; and Mrs. Gale herself answered the summons

"Send for a hackney-coach," said the Marquis: "this lady will accompany me home."

Mrs. Gale withdrew, but shortly returned bringing in Ernestina's bonnet and cloak: she also announced that the vehicle was in attendance. The Marquis then gave Ernestina his arm; and they departed together, leaving the procuress to wonder at the suddenness with which, as she supposed, the nobleman must have revealed his name and rank to the *soi disante* Mrs. Bradshaw.

Not a word was spoken by either the uncle or the niece as they proceeded in the hackney-coach to Albemarle Street—a distance occupying about a quarter of an hour. They both felt embarrassed in each other's company,—Ernestina, because she understood full well that her uncle must have guessed almost everything which she could have wished concealed from him—and the Marquis, because his character as a voluptuary was now completely unveiled to his niece.

On reaching Albemarle Street, he at once conducted her into the Crimson Drawing Room; and bidding her take off her bonnet and cloak, he said, "Ernestina, we must now have a long and serious conversation together."

The lady sate down—averted her head—and wiped away the tears which again trickled down her cheeks. The Marquis allowed her to weep for a short while, knowing that those tears would relieve her surcharged bosom: then placing himself near her, he took her hand and pressed it in token of forgiveness.

"I can already divine much—too much—of your unhappy history, Ernestina," he said, in a tone that was low and trembling: "and if I now ask you to enter into the fullest and completest explanations, it is not—you know it cannot be—with a view to give you unnecessary pain—but to see how far and in what way I can assist you. For that your husband is even ten thousand times a greater villain than I had ever suspected, is quite apparent—and I must release you from the diabolical tyranny which he has doubtless exercised over you."

"What explanations do you wish me to give, uncle?" cried Lady Ernestina Dysart, with a frenzied look. "You behold before you the most wretched—the most miserable—the most guilty of women! O my God! why does not the earth open and swallow me up?—why am I living to endure this ineffable shame—this fearful degradation?"

And she wrung her hands bitterly.

"You must compose and tranquillise yourself, Ernestina," said the Marquis, in a tone of gentle entreaty. "This is an hour of shame and degradation for us both. Oh! in what a place did we meet ere now!—and what a spectacle for our mutual contemplation! Think not, Ernestina, that I am disposed to blame you, however deep your guilt—however flagrant your frailty! I am not unmindful of the damning, humiliating, circumstance that it was my own artifice which enticed you to that house of infamy—though God knows how little I suspected whom I was destined to meet there!"

"But you are a man, my dear uncle," said Ernestina, sobbing bitterly: "and it is the privilege of your sex to do things without dishonour, which plunge poor unhappy woman into shame and infamy."

"We will not conjure up reflections which can only tend to embitter our present anguish all the more acutely," observed the Marquis of Leveson, in a voice of gentle remonstrance. "Rather let us attempt the task of mutual consolation: and I have already assured you that I am not prepared to blame my niece, if she will deal candidly and openly with her uncle."

"I will—I will," exclaimed Ernestina, snatching up his hand and kissing it. "But I can enter upon no detailed explanations at present," she continued in a hurried manner. "You must put what questions you will to me—and I promise to answer them candidly."

"Be it so, Ernestina," said the nobleman: then, after a brief pause, and with extreme embarrassment of manner,—for he could not but feel how delicate the topic was,—he observed, "Your husband forced you to abandon yourself to the Prince Regent?"

"He did," was the reply, accompanied by blushing cheeks and downcast looks. "Oh! you cannot conceive, my dear uncle, the cruelty—the tyranny—the base and cowardly treatment, which I have endured at the hands of that man! He has threatened to murder me—and I am confident that he is capable of putting his dreadful menace into execution when giving way to those fits of frantic rage and furious passion which seize upon him if thwarted or contradicted. It was positively to save my life that I consented to that supreme degradation!"

"And the nature of the document to which his Royal Highness affixed his signature?" said the Marquis of Leveson, inquiringly, as he gazed with profound compassion upon his afflicted niece.

"You are aware, my dear uncle," explained Ernestina, "that at the beginning of June my wretched husband killed the Honourable George Sefton in a duel fought across the dinner-table at Lord Herbert's; and you have of course seen by the newspapers that there was something unfair in the proceedings of this duel on Dysart's part. In fact, if he were placed upon his trial, there is every probability that he would be found guilty of *Murder*, or at all events of *Manslaughter*—and even in the latter case his punishment would be severe. Now, although he fled to the Continent from the immediate presence of the appalling danger, it does not suit his purposes to shut himself entirely out of England: and he consequently devised a scheme for neutralising the effects of that ordeal through which an arrest, a trial, and a condemnation would compel him sooner or later to pass. His project shows a fertility of invention as remarkable as his wickedness in executing it is infamous beyond all shame and loathsome beyond all abhorrence. In a few words, his object was so to combine and arrange his proceedings, that by making me the instrument and the tool of his purposes, he might obtain from the Prince Regent a paper that would ensure him a full pardon, whatever sentence should be eventually passed upon him by a tribunal of justice."

"Ah! I comprehend," exclaimed the Marquis. "What wondrous duplicity!—what an extraordinary proceeding! But tell me the actual contents of that document."

"They are to the effect that inasmuch as he, Paul Dysart, had discovered the existence of a criminal correspondence between his wife and the Prince Regent, he consented to hold his peace, abstain from any law-proceedings, and even award his forgiveness, on condition that the Prince Re-

gent made acknowledgment of his guilt in that document and also promised on his royal word to grant a free pardon to the said Paul Dysart, whatever sentence might be passed upon him by any tribunal on account of the duel with the Honourable George Sefton."

Such was the explanation given of the mysterious document by Lady Ernestina Dysart; and it was delivered in a low, tremulous voice, with much hesitation, and with deep blushes.

"And now tell me," said the Marquis of Leveson, "why the place into which his Royal Highness and myself were shown, was hung with black cloth——"

"Oh! that mystery is soon explained," cried Ernestina, gladly passing from the immediate and positive topic of her own shame and guilt. "About a year ago General Beechey's wife died at the Manor—and the funeral was conducted with the utmost pomp and ceremony. The hall and the staircase were hung with black cloth; and this mourning drapery was subsequently put aside in a closet. When Dysart and myself arrived at the Manor the other day, we found this drapery; and my husband immediately resolved to have it hung up again for the proceedings of last Monday night. His object in doing this was twofold. In the first place, it would so disguise the interior of the house as to prevent any future recognition of the scene where those proceedings were to be enacted, supposing that his Royal Highness should endeavour to find out by means of spies the exact dwelling to which he was taken: and in the second place, Dysart conceived that it would enhance the mystery of the whole affair, and produce a greater effect upon the mind of the Prince, so that no circumstance should be wanting to work upon his terrors on the one hand, while the task of subsequently playing upon his imagination was left to me. But you must understand, my dear uncle, it never was anticipated that *you* would be the Prince's companion on that occasion: nor was I made aware that such was the fact until afterwards. You may conceive how horrified were my feelings *then*, on learning not only that *you* had been made a victim of an outrage which must have filled you with alarm, but that Dysart himself had plundered you of your property and compelled you to surrender up your pocket-book for the purpose of subsequent ransom."

"Poor Ernestina!" exclaimed the nobleman. "Little did I imagine that your graceless husband was the chief of that gang of desperadoes. But as I had never previously spoken to Dysart in my life, I of course did not recognise his voice on that occasion. Then the next step, I suppose, was to compel you to visit me on the ensuing Wednesday—last Wednesday—to obtain the ransom-money for the pocket-book?"

"My husband menaced me in the most terrible manner," replied Ernestina, "and compelled me to do his will in that respect. He cared not how I conducted the delicate transaction so long as I succeeded in accomplishing it; and you may imagine the extent of my joy and gratitude when the appeal which I made to your bounty in this room was met by the gift of the very sum that I was bound to take back to my unprincipled husband. During your temporary absence from the apartment, I thrust the pocket-book into that vase," she continued, indicating the ornament with her delicate hand: "but had you proffered me less than the two thousand guineas which I was necessitated to take back to Dysart, I should have besought you to present me with that amount."

"How strangely is all the mystery unravelling itself!" cried the nobleman. "You cannot conceive my astonishment on discovering the pocket-book in that vase! Not for an instant did my suspicions settle upon you, Ernestina. Would to God that I had never been told otherwise, but the affair had remained enveloped in mystery!"

"Ah! now you hate—despise—and abhor me!" exclaimed Ernestina, bursting into tears. "Oh! I am miserable—most miserable!"

"Console yourself, my darling niece!" cried Lord Leveson, more affected than he had been for many, many years. "Had I done my duty towards you—had I compelled you to leave that villain Dysart and return home to me—all this would not have happened!"

"You have no cause for self reproach, my dear uncle," said Lady Ernestina Dysart, wiping her eyes. "You have more than once besought me to leave him—you have a hundred times assured me that your dwelling was always my home whenever I might choose to make it so! But I have been infatuated with that man: and moreover——"

But she suddenly checked herself and stopped short in confusion and embarrassment, as she felt that her recollections were hurrying her upon most delicate ground.

"Ah! you have some other secret, which is as yet unexplained, Ernestina!" cried the Marquis, gazing intently upon her. "Tell me what is passing in your mind: tell me also how it is that Dysart has obtained such an extraordinary empire over you as to be able to push you onward into such courses as those which you have already detailed! Mere threats and menaces alone could not wield so despotic an influence over a mind so powerful as your's. Besides, you have long ceased to love Dysart—I know you have! It is impossible that you could continue a victim to that infatuation which first made you fling yourself away upon such a man. His treatment of you—his unprincipled character—his dissipated habits—and then that duel which almost stamped him as a murderer, must have crushed your affections and turned your love into loathing. There must consequently be some other cause for that power which he exercises over you? Come—be explicit, Ernestina: it is necessary that I should learn every circumstance, even the slightest, of that position in which you are placed—or else how shall I be able to extricate you completely from the toils in which Dysart has enmeshed you?"

"Every fresh explanation which I am now called upon to give," said Ernestina, her countenance once more becoming scarlet, "is only an addition to the tale of my own infamy. Know, then," she continued, in a voice that was scarcely audible, and with downcast looks, "that I loved another—I was criminal—and my husband detected me——"

"Enough, Ernestina!" ejaculated the Marquis. "I comprehend it all now!"

But he did *not*, however, understand the whole

truth of the dreadful affair to which his niece alluded: nor had she the courage to enlighten him fully on that head by an unreserved confession of the bath-room scene and its shocking results.

"The quarrel which took place between myself and my brother Algernon upwards of a year ago," she continued, "was caused by *his* discovery of my frailty. Yes—he beheld me one day walking with the object of my unlawful love—he observed our tender embraces—and he subsequently remonstrated with me upon the impropriety of my conduct. Hence our dispute—hence that fatal alienation of even the affections of my own brother from me!"

"We will not speak of *him*, Ernestina," said the Marquis, emphatically. "Let us now talk only of yourself. *Can* you and *will* you leave your husband?"

"But how am I to ensure myself against his persecutions in future?" asked the lady. "If I leave him abruptly, without mutual consent——"

"Are there any terms upon which he will consent?" inquired the nobleman.

"You are acquainted with his character, my dear uncle——"

"I comprehend you, Ernestina. Money—money—everything may be done with him by means of money. Tell him, then, that I will allow him a thousand a-year, on condition that he consents to a separation from you and that he retires to the Continent, where his income shall alone be payable."

"I will do so, my dear uncle," said Ernestina; "and no words can convey to you the deep sense of gratitude which I experience for this kindness on your part. To-morrow or next day I will come to you again and report Dysart's answer."

Ernestina then embraced Lord Leveson and took her departure, deeply affected with the interview.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE HUSBAND AND WIFE.

It was one o'clock in the morning when Ernestina arrived in a hackney-coach at Beechey Manor. Her husband had been sitting up carousing with his alleged friend Mr. Jones, although he was not thus waiting in expectation of his wife's return: on the contrary, he was much surprised on hearing her double knock at the front door. He answered the summons himself, Mr. and Mrs. Underdown having long previously retired to rest: and the moment Ernestina entered the hall, he said in a tone of greedy anxiety, "Well, is it all right?"

"Wretch!" muttered Ernestina, as she flung upon him a look of mingled scorn and hatred: and she immediately observed by his flushed countenance and the unsteady manner in which he held the candle, that he had been drinking deeply.

"What was that you said?" he demanded, brutally, uncertain whether he had heard aright.

She gave him no response: but snatching the light from his hand, proceeded into the dining-room, where she filled a tumbler with water, which she drank at a draught.

"Now, then," said Dysart—for we need no longer style him by his assumed name of Bradshaw,—"perhaps you will condescend to give me some account of your proceedings: unless you like to defer it until to-morrow morning——"

"As well now as at any other time," she exclaimed, with a demonstration of spirit so marked and unmistakable that her husband prepared himself for a scene.

"Well—and do you intend to pick a quarrel with me?" he demanded, fiercely.

"I care not whether I quarrel with you, or not," she replied. "You see before you a desperate woman——"

"Then I'll very soon knock your desperation out of you," exclaimed Dysart, staggering forward with clenched fist and upraised arm to strike her.

"Beware!" she cried, snatching up a knife from the table on which the supper-things still remained: then, stepping back, but brandishing the weapon, while her countenance was pale with rage, she said in a hoarse tone, "Dare to strike me, wretch, and I will plunge this knife into your heart—although I were to mount the scaffold to-morrow morning for the murder!"

"What the devil ails the woman?" exclaimed Dysart, shrinking back in terror: then, throwing himself upon a seat, he said, "I am prepared to listen to anything you may have to tell me."

"You are doubtless anxiously expecting me to place the other five hundred guineas in your hand," she observed, with a fierce bitterness in her tone and an implacable hatred in her looks: "but you will be disappointed—for I have returned without them."

"Then have you not seen the gentleman?" demanded Dysart.

"I have," she responded coldly.

"And did he cheat you?—or did you play the prude at the last moment?" inquired her husband, half starting from his chair, but sinking back into it the next instant as he saw that his wife was really nerved with an unusual spirit.

"The person whom I encountered in Soho Square," she said, still with that same freezing bitterness of voice, "was my own uncle, the Marquis of Leveson."

"By Jove! this is unfortunate," exclaimed Dysart, startled and almost astounded by the intelligence. "But of course you made some excuse—you declared it was all a mistake——"

"I did no such thing," interrupted Ernestina. "He took me home with him—and we had a long and serious conversation together. The result was that he is prepared to make you, through me, a certain proposition——"

"What is it?" demanded Dysart, abruptly.

"He will allow you a thousand guineas a-year on condition that you retire to the Continent, where the revenue thus afforded by his bounty can alone be received by you:"—and as Ernestina thus spoke, she fixed her eyes upon her husband with an expression which told him as eloquently as such speaking orbs could do, that her own mind was irrevocably made up to some settled project.

"And is there no other condition affixed to this splendid proposal on your uncle's part?" demanded Paul Dysart, who already more than suspected what was coming, and who gave utterance to those words with a savage irony.

"A separation between you and me," responded Ernestina, with icy calmness.

"Well, then, I won't consent to it," rejoined Dysart, doggedly. "I can't afford to part with you, my dear, on such cheap terms," he added, with a coarse chuckling laugh.

"But my resolution is unalterably taken," she said: "and I tell you once for all that I will live with you no longer. I confess that I was unfaithful to you—that I learnt to love another. But even if there had been no provocation on your side, my guilt has every extenuation in the awful punishment it has received. There *was*, however, all possible provocation on your part. You know how I once loved you—how completely wrapped up in you I was: and that fervid affection on my part only required to be cherished in order to last until the end. But instead of appreciating that illimitable love which I bestowed upon you—instead of recompensing me by your kindness for any sacrifice of fortune and position, wealth and comfort, which I made in becoming your wife—you treated me with cruelty, neglect, and indifference. Left for days and days alone—deserted by you from morning to night—was it singular that I yielded to temptation? You were not nigh to cheer me—to give me that moral strength which ever arises from a love that is reciprocated by its object: but you left me to solitude and loneliness—or else to the influence of that temptation. Ah! I can assure you that the siege which I sustained was long—my better feelings triumphed for months and months,—until in a moment when some flagrant neglect or downright cruelty on your part had left me weaker in mind than ever I was before—in that fatal moment, I say, did I succumb. But my punishment has been dreadful—dreadful: and now I am resolved to endure your despotism no longer."

"I have listened to this long speech," said Dysart, who was at first overawed and even dismayed by the terrible earnestness of his wife's tone, manner, and language,—"I have listened to this long speech with as much attention and patience as a juryman to an Old Bailey pleader: but I have nothing to say in answer to it. All I want you to understand is that I don't mean to part with you for a paltry thousand a-year. You are my wife—and if you leave me, I will ferret you out and bring you back. If you dare to take refuge in your uncle's house, I'll penetrate into its innermost recesses and drag you out. So there is my decision—and I'll write the same to the old fellow the first thing after breakfast in the morning. Now, then, let us go up to bed."

"Never again, Dysart," said Ernestina, emphatically, "shall you and I press the same couch. The incidents of the last few hours have made such an impression upon my mind, that I am resolved to leave you—I am determined to separate from you."

"You are mad!" ejaculated Dysart, furiously, as he started from his seat. "Dare to thwart me—and I'll dig up the dead body of your paramour and bring it into this very house to scare and horrify you into submission."

"Your menaces are vain and useless," said Ernestina: but her countenance grew ashy pale and her whole form trembled visibly beneath the blighting influence of that awful threat which had smitten her like a pestilence.

"Well, we shall see," exclaimed Dysart. "Now drop that knife—and follow me directly—or a death-struggle must ensue between us:"—and he advanced towards her.

"Keep off!" she cried in a frenzied tone: "I am not the mistress of my actions—I cannot control my rage—I am desperate!"

"Fool—mad woman!" muttered Dysart, returning to his seat. "Now let us reason quietly for a few minutes. You gave me a long speech just now—and it is but fair that you should hear one in return. Don't you think that, if you proclaim open war against me and get your precious old uncle to back you in it,—don't you think, I say, that I could tell a pretty story about you? Now, what are the facts?—you appear to have forgotten them. Last June we left England very suddenly and went to the Continent. On our arrival there we resolve to remain abroad some time, Paris being so much to our liking. We send over and dismiss all the servants from our villa at Blackheath. A few weeks afterwards, business compels me to come secretly over to London: and I leave you in Paris. Ah! how you wanted to accompany me!—and when I refused, on account of the expense and so on, how earnestly you enjoined me not to go near the villa in case of being seen and arrested! Your very importunity on that point made me suspect something—though I did not know what. Well, on coming to London, I *did* go to the villa: and I rummaged through all your drawers to see if there were any letters or papers which you were fearful of falling into my hands. But instead of any such documentary evidence, I found a corpse concealed in the bath—and what was more, a rope-ladder along with it——"

"Enough, sir—enough!" said Ernestina, in a hoarse voice, and with a dread quivering of the limbs. "It is useless to prolong the present scene, so painful to us both."

"More painful to you, I fancy, than to me," observed Paul Dysart, with characteristic brutality. "What the devil do you mean? You inflict upon me a long tirade of reproaches—you sum up all *my* misdeeds—and you will not listen to my counter-statement! But I choose to recapitulate those incidents," he added, rising and placing his back against the door.

Ernestina took a seat, and gazed abstractedly upon the fire which was smouldering in the grate.

"Well, as I was saying," continued her husband, now animated with a fiendish desire to torture her as much as possible, and also hoping thereby to reduce her to submission, as he had done on so many, many previous occasions,—"as I was saying, I not only found the corpse but also the rope-ladder. The features were not so disfigured but that I was able to recognise who the deceased was: and the rope-ladder told the entire tale plainly enough. Moreover, I called to mind your confusion when you met me on the night of our departure from the villa—your pretext about the loss of your ring—and several other circumstances which made the whole thing as plain as the sun at noon-day. Well, I hastened back to Paris—accused you of your infidelity—and horrified you with an account of the proofs thereof! Ah! how you humbled yourself then—how you fell at my feet—tore your hair—beat your bosom—and watered the very floor with your tears! Yes—you understood it all—your paramour had been suffocated—perhaps even while you were packing up

your boxes on the lid of the very bath which became his coffin! You implored me to conceal the effects of your fault—to hide the damning proof of your guilt. Then was it that the idea struck me of rendering your charms subservient to my purposes. I propounded my plan—you swore in your despair to do anything or everything if I would only consign to the earth that evidence of your frailty which was still unburied. I consented—but, mistrusting you I vowed that the corpse should not be moved until *you* had performed your portion of the compact. To this you were compelled to agree. We came to England—and you fulfilled your agreement, playing you part admirably with the Prince and obtaining the requisite document. Then I forced you to visit your uncle and receive the money for the pocket-book. This you did likewise: and then I allowed the corpse to be interred. Thus far we have been of mutual assistance: and now we should grant mutual pardon likewise. But no such thing. You get a new crotchet into your head—and you say that you are determined upon a separation. I say that I won't have it at the price: and now it remains to be seen who will get the best off if we go to war with each other."

Ernestina made no reply—but sate gazing abstractedly upon the grate in which the fire was now extinguished. She was motionless: her countenance was ghastly pale—and she only held the knife mechanically in her hand, without being conscious that she still retained it. Deep and unutterable thoughts were concentrated in her mind,—thoughts of her dead lover, his many admirable qualities, the graces of his person, and the boundless affection which he had entertained for her!

"Well, have you nothing to say?" inquired her husband, after a pause of upwards of a minute.

Ernestina started—recollected herself—and replied in a cold tone, "Nothing more than the resolve which I have already communicated to you."

"Then you are decided?" he said, in a voice hoarse with passion.

"Unalterably," was her answer. "You may kill me—but while I have life in me I will never consent to remain with you after this night."

"But for the rest of this night——"

"We must stay beneath the same roof. I am ill—exhausted—worn out alike in mind and body," said Ernestina, in a plaintive voice: "or I would quit the house this moment. Would that I had never come back to it!" she added, bitterly.

"Well, I consent that we occupy different chambers," said Dysart, completely puzzled how to act: "but I warn you that I shall make you a prisoner in the house till you swear the most solemn oath that you renounce all ideas of leaving me."

"Let us occupy different chambers, then," observed Ernestina, repeating his proposal; and she felt her courage and her spirits alike reviving at the advantage she had already gained in the contest with her brutal husband.

Still retaining the knife in her hand, and now clutching it with the consciousness that it was a weapon of defence, she took up a candle and moved towards the door. Dysart not only made way, but retreated to some distance, as if to convince her that he would not attempt to do her an injury. In fact, the bully was somewhat cowed and much dismayed by the cold desperation of her manner: the long speech which he had delivered, had evidently failed in its intended effect of overawing her—and his hope was that the morrow would find her in a more plastic humour and ductile temperament.

He therefore allowed her to ascend tranquilly and unmolested to the chamber which she selected for herself: and following her at a distance, he locked the door of that room which she thus entered. He then retired to his own apartment, muttering to himself, "Her old uncle shall either agree to double the proposed income—or I will keep her with me, and make a market of her charms."

With this diabolical reflection uppermost in his mind, Paul Dysart went to bed and soon fell asleep.

But in the meantime Ernestina had not sought her couch—nor was she making the slightest preparation to retire to rest. On the contrary, she had thrown herself into an arm-chair and was giving way to her reflections. The physical and mental exhaustion of which she ere now complained, was no longer felt: her courage had revived—she was nerved with a desperate energy. The dreadful scene that had just taken place between her husband and herself, convinced her that henceforth she must either become the slave of his despotic will, or else behold in him an implacable enemy. She understood full well the reasons which prevented him from agreeing to a separation: and she did not choose to allow her uncle's generosity to be taxed beyond the amount which he himself had volunteered as an adequate provision for Dysart. Nor would she consent to remain with a man who was base enough to contemplate the barter of her charms for gold. In addition to all these powerful motives urging her to adopt some resolute and decisive step, the feeling of revenge had flamed up in her bosom and was already gnawing at her heart's core.

Her mind was speedily made up. She saw a means—one and the only means—of effecting her emancipation and wreaking her vengeance at the same time. The plan was bold—desperate—and fraught with danger to herself, inasmuch as it might, if suspected and seen through by her husband, lead him to adopt a counter-vengeance and proclaim the tale of the bath-room and the buried body. But still she saw a way of carrying out her purposes, and yet inducing Dysart to keep the seal of silence upon his lips relative to that appalling tragedy. Her resolve was accordingly taken: she would dare and risk everything for freedom and revenge!

It was now past two in the morning: but she had not the least inclination to sleep. Besides, when a desperate and vindictive woman has determined upon a particular course of action, she does not rest while she should be working in the furtherance of her design. Ernestina was a prisoner in that chamber: but it was important for her to leave it for a short half-hour. How was this to be done, so that her husband should not discover in the morning that his precaution of locking the door had been vain and futile?

Ernestina examined the door carefully. It had one of those usual bed-room locks which instead of being inserted in the wood-work itself, was

LADY ERNESTINA DYSART.

screwed on to the door. If she had an instrument she might unscrew that lock, and thus free herself. Her eyes wandered slowly round the room in search of what she required: and they settled upon the knife which she had brought up with her, and which she had laid on the table. Thus the same proceeding which had facilitated the escape of Louisa Stanley from the Minor Canon's house at Canterbury, was now adopted by Lady Ernestina Dysart to emancipate herself from the chamber at Beechey Manor.

The lock was speedily removed: she opened the door—took the light in her hand—and descended to the dining-room. There she obtained writing-materials—sate down—and hastily penned the following note:—

"To the Chief Magistrate at Bow Street.

"Mr. Paul Dysart, who shot the Honourable George Sefton at Lord Herbert's house, in the month of June last, and against whom a verdict of '*Wilful Murder*' has been returned by a Coroner's Jury, is now living at Beechey Manor near Wandsworth, under the name of Bradshaw. Great precautions must be used in capturing him, as there are several avenues of escape from the house; and he is cunning in the extreme. By no means let him learn how his presence in England has been discovered; and on no account let him see this letter, which, though anonymous, contains the truth."

Having folded, sealed, and addressed the letter, Lady Ernestina Dysart consulted her watch. It was now three o'clock in the morning: and she hesitated whether to take the next step immediately, or wait a little. But her mind was soon made up: and having decided on proceeding in her plan without delay, she quitted the dining-room—passed into the back premises of the Manor—and entered a small chamber where Underdown and his wife slept.

The old couple were fast asleep in bed: but Ernestina awoke them, placing her finger upon her lips to enjoin silence. They were naturally

alarmed at being thus disturbed: Lady Dysart, however, hastened to reassure them as to the motive of her presence there; and as they had received many kindnesses from her, during the short period of her residence at the Manor, they were not annoyed at being startled from their slumbers.

"You must do me a very particular favour," she said, when they were thus tranquillised: "and above all things, I conjure you to observe a profound secrecy as to all that passes between us."

"You know, ma'am, that we don't gossip," replied Mrs. Underdown. "No living soul has heard us breathe a syllable about the strange affair that took place here t'other Monday night—when the place was hung with the black cloth and the carriage come with all those men——"

"Well, well—we don't want a history of all that over again," interrupted old Tom Underdown, testily, as he sate up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

"I was only proving to the lady that we don't bother ourselves about other people's concerns," exclaimed Mrs. Underdown. "Howsomever, I'll hold my tongue, and let Mrs. Bradshaw tell us what she wishes done. We're both ready to serve you, ma'am, to the best of our poor ability."

"I know you are—and I thank you," answered Ernestina. "What I now require," she continued, addressing herself to the old man, "is that you get up at once—leave the house by the back gate as quietly as possible—and take this letter up to London. But you must be sure and return by breakfast-time, so that Mr. Bradshaw may see you working as usual in the garden: for he must on no account have reason to suspect, either this morning or afterwards, that you undertook such an errand for me."

"What o'clock is it, ma'am?" inquired the old fellow.

"Just three," answered Lady Ernestina: "about five minutes past."

"Oh! there's plenty of time," said Underdown. "Where is the letter to be delivered?"

"Put it in the letter-box at the Police Office in Bow Street," replied Ernestina: "and if there be no letter box, thrust it underneath the door."

"The Police Office?" echoed the old couple, in a breath: and they gazed up at Ernestina with uneasy looks.

"Yes—the Police Office," she repeated, emphatically. "But fear nothing. Keep your own counsel—and all will be well. Besides, you have done naught to render you timid or apprehensive——"

"No, ma'am—certainly not," observed Underdown. "But being privy, as one may say, to the business of t'other night——"

"Not at all," interrupted Ernestina. "You merely assisted in hanging up the black cloth—and then you remained close in your own room. With anything that took place afterwards you had no concern. Besides, the object of this letter has not the least reference to *that* affair—neither will it transpire in what may follow. Do what I tell you—keep your own counsel—and here are ten guineas for you."

"We shan't have ears or eyes for anything you don't want us to hear or see, ma'am," said old Underdown, his wrinkled face brightening up marvellously at the sight of the gold. "So now I'll be off."

Ernestina then quitted the chamber occupied by the old couple: and, retracing her way to the hall, she was about to ascend the stairs to her own room, when the sound of a footstep fell upon her ear.

Heavens! if it were her husband, he would suspect her of some sinister intention—he might even murder her in his rage! The colour fled from her cheeks, leaving her pale as death: her heart was chilled—it seemed ice at the very core;—and her breath was hushed in awful suspense. For a few moments she paused and listened: some one was evidently descending the stairs stealthily—and the mysterious visitor Jones flashed to her recollection! Yes—it must be he: for assuredly her husband would not walk about the house with such studied caution and noiselessness.

Relieved by the thought, Ernestina glided into the dining-room—extinguished the light—and concealed herself behind the window-curtains. If it should happen to be Dysart, she hoped to be safe in that retreat: and she was equally averse to encounter his friend Jones, who would be sure to tell him, when next they met, that he had seen his wife wandering about at that hour. Thus Ernestina had a double motive for concealing herself in the manner described.

Stealthily did the steps continue to descend the stairs—next they crossed the hall—and then they approached the dining room. Ernestina's suspense was fearful to a degree: an awful consternation was upon her. That the individual was the *soi-disant* Mr. Jones, she had now no longer the slightest doubt. But what could he want?—what motive had he in creeping about the house at such an hour and in such a manner? Was plunder his aim? If so, he would murder any one whom he discovered espying his actions!

Such were the terrible reflections that swept through the brain of the terrified lady as she stood, rigid, motionless, and cold as a marble statue, behind the curtains. The individual entered the dining-room: Ernestina's eyes caught the gleam of a light through the heavy drapery;—but she dared not peep forth—the blood was curdled in her veins!

"I hope the brandy isn't locked up, after all!" muttered the individual in an audible tone, as he advanced across the room.

The voice was the same which had answered her when she spoke from the window on the preceding night: the stealthy intruder was therefore, as she had suspected, none other than Mr. Jones. He was no burglar who had just broken into the house: but the guest whom her husband had received and lodged at the Manor.

And that voice—it again sounded familiar to her ears! An irresistible curiosity, rendered more poignant by a vague but tremendous suspicion which had just sprung up in her mind, prompted her to peep between the curtains: but no pen can describe the awful sensation which seized upon her, when she recognised the countenance of the man who had dug the grave in the garden of the villa at Blackheath!

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE RESULTS OF THE LETTER.

A CRY of horror rose to Ernestina's lips: but it was met—choked—and stifled, ere it burst forth, by a return of that tremendous consternation which had already seized upon her once within the last few minutes. Transfixed to the spot where she stood behind the curtain, she was again cold—motionless—and rigid as a statue: and as a marble statue was she also pale!

She knew not who the man was—she was even ignorant of his name: but there was something so fearfully sinister in his looks, that the presence of a loathsome reptile in the room could not have produced a more powerful effect upon her. And then, to think that such a man should be her husband's guest—perhaps his friend,—a man who had dug a grave with all the cool unconcern of a matter of business, and who had handled and buried the corpse of her paramour with a kindred indifference,—the idea that such a man was an inmate of the house, struck Ernestina with the direst horror.

But she remained perfectly still and motionless behind the curtains, while the fellow tried the doors of the side-board. They were locked: and he gave vent to a fearful imprecation, which enhanced Ernestina's alarm at his desperate character.

"Well, this is devilish pleasant," he muttered to himself. "Not to be able to sleep a wink—and to have nothing to drive away thought with. By jingo! I'll break open the doors of this cursed side-board——Ah! here are the keys, by Satan!"

And this imprecation, which was uttered with a fearful emphasis, struck awfully upon the ear of the listening lady behind the curtain.

Mr. Jones now proceeded to try one key after another; and in a brief space he succeeded in opening the wine-cooler of the side-board. To his supreme satisfaction he found a bottle of liquor; and having assured himself, by the test of a long draught, that it was brandy, he expressed his delight in audible terms. He then locked up the wine-cooler again, and took his departure from the room with the bottle in one hand and his candle in the other.

Ernestina's breath appeared to return with an ease that increased in proportion as the retreating footsteps became less and less audible: and when some minutes had elapsed and the house was again quiet, she stole forth from her hiding-place. But she had now to descend to the kitchen to procure a light for her candle; and, having done this, she retraced her way cautiously and stealthily to her chamber.

The task of restoring the lock to its place upon the door did not occupy many minutes; and by the time the work was accomplished, she felt so thoroughly worn out and exhausted alike in mind and body, that she could scarcely undress herself. But at length she laid aside her apparel and sought the couch. At first she feared that the agitated condition of her thoughts and the thousand topics which kept them in a dizzy whirl, would prevent her from obtaining that slumber which was so necessary to recruit her mental and physical energies for all that was to happen during the day now about to dawn: but nature speedily indemnified herself for the fatigues and rending anxieties that had been undergone.

She soon fell asleep, and slept soundly too. When she awoke, her watch informed her that it was nine o'clock; and she hastily quitted her couch. A glance flung from the window, showed her old Underdown working diligently in the garden; —and she felt assured that her errand had been accomplished. Perhaps the letter was already in the hands of the Chief Magistrate?

Ernestina felt that she had now a difficult part to play—a part that was likewise loathsome and revolting to her feelings. For she was about to manifest the utmost submission to her husband—induce him to believe that there was a thorough revival of affection on her part—coax, wheedle, and caress him—and, in fine, adopt all possible means to lull him into a false security with respect to her feelings and her conduct.

Scarcely was her morning-toilette completed, when Dysart unlocked the door and entered the room. The glance which he flung upon his wife was followed by a gleam of triumph irradiating his countenance: for he read mingled contrition and submissiveness in her whole demeanour.

"Well, Ernestina," he said, in a mild voice, "is it to be peace or war?"

"Peace—by all means, peace," she exclaimed: "that is, if I did not go too far last night to render peace impossible?"

"Since I asked the question, it must have been with the view of leaving the decision in your hands," returned Dysart. "I thought you would see the folly of a rupture with me:—it could answer no good end—because our affairs, interests, and secrets are too intimately blended not to render it prudent for us to work in harmony and in concert. Do you regard the matter in the same light?"

"Precisely," was the response, delivered with much apparent earnestness. "Besides, after all that has occurred I should not in any case desert you so long as my services may at any moment be required in your behalf?"

"What do you particularly allude to?" asked Dysart.

"I mean that if circumstances should render it necessary to use that document which I obtained from the Prince Regent——"

"Of course! the thing would have to be managed delicately and prudently," exclaimed Dysart. "It could not be entrusted to clumsy hands—for my very life may be made to depend upon that paper."

"Think you, then," said Ernestina, approaching her husband with tears in her eyes, "that I would leave you in danger and difficulty, after taking so much trouble to procure that document? No, no: I do not possess a bad heart—although my temper may be hasty——But you should make allowances for my feelings after such a scene as that which occurred last night in Soho Square. To think that I should have been thus exposed to Lord Leveson! Ah! it was enough to goad me almost to madness—or plunge me into despair!"

"Well, I dare say that I was too hasty and severe in judging you," said Dysart. But come—we will say no more relative to the past: and let us be better friends for the future."

"Such is my earnest hope," answered the lady, wiping her eyes.

They then descended to the breakfast-parlour; and Ernestina continued to behave with the utmost kindness towards her husband. Of her own accord she arranged Mr. Jones's meal upon the tray; although she could scarcely repress a visible shudder when she thought of the wretch for whom she was thus preparing his food, which Dysart hastened to carry up to him.

After breakfast, Ernestina went into the domestic offices to issue her commands respecting the dinner; and she found an opportunity of exchanging a few words with Underdown. The old man had faithfully executed her commission; and she once more charged him and his wife not to betray any uneasiness or exhibit any suspicious emotion, should some startling occurrence take place during the day. Having thus again reassured the old couple, Ernestina repaired to the drawing-room, where her husband was lounging upon a sofa, reading a book.

It was now nearly eleven o'clock, and Ernestina was trembling inwardly with an intense anxiety and nervousness. The officers of justice might be expected every moment; and so much—indeed, everything—depended upon whether Dysart should suspect that she had aught to do with his arrest. She weighed in her mind all the chances for and against this result: her imagination was on the rack in reviewing the measures she had adopted and the calculations she had made. Her better judgment convinced her that she was safe and secure; but her fears suggested the contrary. She was like one who has committed a crime all traces of which have in reality disappeared, but the discovery of which a guilty conscience is ever whispering to be imminent.

When she entered the drawing-room, Dysart laid down his book, and began to converse upon a variety of indifferent topics. He evidently had determined upon adopting a conciliatory policy towards his wife: but she did not repent of what she had done. In fact, the longer she meditated upon the character of her husband and the life she had led with him, the more she was resolved to emancipate herself from so abhorrent a thraldom, under any circumstances. This feeling on her part gradually inspired her with the necessary courage and presence of mind to go through with the measures she had initiated; and sitting down to her needle-work, she conversed calmly, kindly, and submissively with the man whom she had determined to send to the gibbet.

It was about mid-day, when old Mrs. Underdown entered the drawing-room to say that a person who had just arrived from France, with letters from General Beechey, desired to see Mr. Bradshaw. Ernestina dropped her work in the sudden confusion which seized upon her: for she felt convinced that the crisis was now at hand. But her emotion passed unobserved by her husband; and she instantaneously recovered her presence of mind.

Dysart was evidently struck with a suspicion that all was not right: but he entertained not the remotest idea that Ernestina was plotting against him.

"What sort of a man is he?" he inquired hastily of the old woman. "But did you say I was at home?"

"I said I didn't know, sir—I would see," she answered. "He seems a respectable-looking person, short and slight——"

"Shall I see him, Ernestina?" asked Dysart, turning uneasily towards his wife, and speaking to her in the French language, with which they were both intimately convers ant. "Do you not think it is singular that Beechey should send over a messenger, instead of writing by the post? Because he and I have nothing so very important between us——"

"I really know not how to advise," responded Ernestina, also in the French tongue. "It may be a stratagem: and yet——"

"Well, at all events, I must risk it," exclaimed Dysart: then turning to the old woman, he said, "Show the person up."

The instant Mrs. Underdown had quitted the room, Dysart handed Ernestina a key, saying in a hurried and nervous manner, "Now, if this should really be a trick, you must instantaneously go to the bed-room, open my desk, and secure the document about your person: because if I am taken, my papers may be searched. And, by the bye, there's that fellow——"

"Jones?" ejaculated Ernestina, impatiently. "What of him? Does he incur any risk?"

"Why—they will scarcely search the house if they secure me," exclaimed Dysart. "But——"

He stopped short: for at this moment Mrs. Underdown re-appeared, introducing the visitor into the room. She immediately withdrew; and both Dysart and his wife threw rapid and searching glances upon the individual who now stood in their presence. But there was nothing of that ill-looking demeanour and suspicious mien which the imagination is wont to associate with its ideas of an officer of justice. Nevertheless, Dysart was evidently uneasy, while Ernestina felt convinced that she man *was* a myrmidon of the law.

"Mr. Dysart," he said, "I am sorry to be compelled to do my duty—and resistance will be vain. My people have surrounded the house——"

"O heaven!" screamed Ernestina, with an admirably assumed outburst of feeling: and she clasped her hands as if in the deepest anguish.

"Don't make yourself miserable, my dear," said Dysart, flinging upon her a significant look to remind her of his injunctions relative to the writing-desk. "You had better leave the room——"

"Yes—I think your ladyship had better withdraw," observed Larry Sampson—for he it was: although Ernestina had not recognised in him the sham postman of the preceding Friday.

"But are you going to take my husband away?" she cried, still sustaining that artificial show of grief which was as successfully assumed as were the blandishments which in that very apartment she had lavished upon the Prince Regent.

"Your ladyship shall see him again before he goes," answered Larry. "I am in no hurry to remove him, if he behaves as a gentleman should."

Ernestina embraced Dysart with affected enthusiasm, and then hurried from the room. Speeding to the bed-chamber, she hastily unlocked the desk—took out the document—and secured it about her person. She then closed the desk again, leaving the key in it.

"Ah! now my vengeance will be consummated!" she murmured to herself, her whole manner and appearance suddenly changing from assumed grief and submissiveness into the desperate energy of an outraged and resolute woman. "I have not played the hypocrite without avail: I won back

his confidence—and he has entrusted into my hands the only means of saving his life. But he is a doomed man—yes, a doomed man: and I shall be free!"

There was now something terrible and even awful in the beauty of Ernestina Dysart, as she thus gave way to her vindictive musings. Her eyes flashed fire—her whole form dilated—her bosom swelled with grand upheavings—and her countenance, which had become pale as marble, wore an expression of stern decision, like that of a Roman matron when sending forth her son to die in the defence of his country.

Having remained for a few minutes in the bedchamber, Ernestina went back to the drawing-room, where she found two other constables, in addition to Larry Sampson; and her husband was drinking a glass of brandy-and-water, doubtless to keep up his spirits. The lady resumed an aspect of profound grief: but Dysart bade her "cheer up, as the thing must have happened sooner or later." She saw that he entertained not the slightest suspicion of her treachery towards him; and she averted her head to conceal the joy and satisfaction which swelled in her heart and which she feared might beam forth in her looks.

"I suppose you will allow me to say a few words apart to her ladyship?" said Dysart, addressing Sampson.

"In this room, by all means," was the response.

Dysart then drew his wife into the recess of the bay-window, and whispered in French, "I suppose you have got the document safe?"

She replied in the affirmative.

"So much the better," observed Dysart. "But I don't think they mean to search the house: indeed, why should they? They have got me—and that is all they want. It appears that the principal man there—the one who came up first—is Sampson, the famous officer: but he won't tell me how he found me out."

"Perhaps you were seen, recognised, and watched on some occasion?" said Ernestina. "But since the mischief is done, it is useless to waste time in speculating how it was caused. What do you wish me to do?" she asked, in a tone of submission.

"I suppose you won't like to live here all by yourself?" said Dysart, inquiringly.

"No—Oh! no," answered Ernestina. "I would either take a lodging near the place where you will be confined——"

"Newgate, my dear—Newgate," observed Dysart, with a sickly smile. "We need not mince matters: I shall experience the reality soon enough. But if you would prefer going to Albemarle Street, I have no objection under the circumstances——"

"I should be loath to do anything that will add to your sorrows," observed the lady, raising her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Come—perhaps this grief on your part is more than I deserve," said her husband, his harsh nature softened for the moment by the appearance of profound sorrow on Ernestina's part. "All things considered, you had perhaps better take a lodging near Newgate: unless you prefer staying with the Marquis. But since we have agreed upon peace," added Dysart, now feeling that he was entirely in his wife's power, "I would rather you should consult your own wishes. There is one thing, remember, to be considered—which is, that the Prince has frequently visited your uncle of late, and you might meet him at Leveson House."

"And should I not avail myself of those opportunities to strengthen the claim which we already possess upon him?" said Ernestina, apparently with a tone and look of profound sincerity.

"Ah! if you would do *that*," said Dysart, "I cannot object——"

"You know—you *must* know, Paul," she murmured, "that I will do everything—anything to ensure your safety!"

"Then go to Leveson House, by all means," he answered: "and when I am once more at liberty—as I must inevitably be in a few weeks—I will convince you that I am not ungrateful."

"Yes—it will be all over in a few weeks," said Ernestina, deeply feeling all the ominous significancy of the words which she had just repeated.

"Then you will leave the Manor in the course of the day?" observed Dysart. "But—but," he added, hesitatingly, "you had better not see that fellow Jones. Tell old Underdown to explain to him what has happened to me——"

"Your suggestions shall be acted upon," interrupted Ernestina. "I will procure a glass coach from Wandsworth and repair to Leveson House within a couple of hours. To-morrow I will call and see you——"

"I shall be anxiously expecting you, my dear Ernestina," observed Dysart. "And now—before I go—tell me whether you forgive me for the past?"

"Do you forgive *me?*" she whispered, in a tremulous voice.

"Yes—let us embrace," replied her husband: and Ernestina submitted to the ordeal with an inward shuddering—for it seemed to her as if the man she had once loved with so deep an infatuation, was already a corpse stiff and stark from the gallows.

They then separated—Dysart taking his departure with the Bow Street officers: and within two hours he was lodged in Newgate.

Ernestina, who had no inclination to meet Mr. Jones face to face, sent him by Underdown a message to the effect enjoined by her husband; and having liberally rewarded the old couple for all their attentions, she entered the glass-coach which had been procured from Wandsworth to take her to Leveson House.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A HAPPY FAMILY.—THE PRINCESS.

In a splendidly-furnished drawing-room, at one of the finest mansions in Piccadilly, three persons were seated. These were Lord and Lady Florimel, with their niece, the Honourable Miss Florence Eaton.

The nobleman was about forty-one or forty-two years of age—short and slender, but remarkably handsome. It was evident from his appearance that he must in his youth have been of a feminine cast of beauty: for his features were small and of classic outline—his dark hair was long and

curled naturally—and his whiskers were only of comparatively recent growth. His teeth were admirable, and his complexion was remarkably pure.

Lady Florimel, whose Christian name was Pauline, was thirty-eight; and, although inclining to embonpoint, she was exceedingly handsome alike in countenance and form. Her tall stature prevented the expansion of her charms from appearing too luxuriant: but the richness of their contours was grandly developed. Her marriage with Florimel had remained unblest by offspring: and thus nothing had marred the splendour of that beauty which still seemed to retain all the first freshness of youth. Her hair, of a dark brown, was remarkably luxuriant: her teeth were as perfect and as brilliant as when the partitig roses of the lips revealed them in the smiles of her girlhood;—and she had not mingled sufficiently in the pleasures and gaiety of the fashionable world to have lost the carnation from her cheeks in the hot and unwholesome atmosphere of ball rooms.

Lady Florimel's elder sister, Octavia, had married the Honourable Arthur Eaton, who at the death of his father became Lord Marchmont. But he did not long survive this accession to the family title and estates: his constitution had been considerably undermined by the treacheries and misfortunes he had experienced in his youth—and he sank into an early grave. The title became extinct: the landed property passed into the hands of a distant male relative of the family;—but Lady Marchmont was left with a comfortable income derived from money in the funds. Her charming daughter Florence was then her only consolation: and though the worm of early sorrows had eaten its cankering way into her heart, she still hoped and prayed to live long enough to see the dearly beloved girl grow up to woman's estate. But in this aspiration she was disappointed: a severe cold which she caught, threw her upon a sick bed—and in a few days she breathed her last.

Florence was eight years old when she thus lost her mother. But she found an affectionate substitute in her aunt Pauline, who at once took the orphan under her care: and as Lord Florimel had no children of his own, he soon learnt to love little Florence as dearly as if she were his daughter. The orphan girl grew up in beauty and innocence: and at the time we now introduce her to our readers, she is nineteen years old.

But let us draw the portrait of Florence Eaton as she appeared on that occasion, when seated with her uncle and aunt at the palatial mansion in Piccadilly.

She was one of those Madonna-like creatures who seem too fair to inhabit this cold, selfish world of our's. Her complexion was of the purest white and dazzlingly transparent, so that upon her high and innocent forehead, where candour was enthroned on its unblemished ivory seat, the delicate tracery of azure veins appeared through the diaphanous skin. Her hair, which was of a light brown tinged with a golden hue, fell in the profusion of countless tresses upon her shoulders and back: for it was worn as in girlhood and with none of it gathered up in a knot behind.

Her eyes were azure—not large, but full of a peculiar and melting softness, which was also visible in her smile. Her brows were darker than her hair, but delicately pencilled: and her long lashes were a shade darker still. Her nose was perfectly straight—her lips were of the brightest coral in hue, and seemed cut with the precision of a classic chisel—and her chin was turned with an equally artistic accuracy.

Her shape was that of a sylph. Nothing could exceed the graceful arching of the swan-like neck, or the statuesque carriage of the shoulders. The bust was gently developed in flowing outline, sufficient to enhance the beauty of her person, but not too much to mar the airy lightness of her figure. The elegance of her symmetry was combined with a willowy flexibility of the form: her feet moved so glancingly along that it appeared impossible for them to leave their imprint upon the softest carpet, nor crush the most delicate flower.

Indeed, nothing could exceed the almost infantile loveliness of this charming, Madonna-like creature. And to bring a tear into that soft azure eye—to check the smile upon those bright red lips—to extort a sigh from that gentle breast—to make that sweet head droop beneath the burden of affliction—or to render that clear silver voice tremulous with sobs,—Oh! this were a cruelty of which none save a monster undeserving the name of Man, or a fiend desecrating the form of Woman, could possibly be capable!

In her artless disposition and guileless nature, she was gay and happy; and her soft musical laugh was fresh and pure as the rippling of the crystal stream whose pebbly bottom is as visible as an eye-ball through a tear. And it was so beautiful to see her smile—not only because there was the heavenly irradiation of innocence beaming on her countenance, but also because the coral lips when thus sweetly wreathing displayed the two rows of pearl that formed her teeth.

Such was Florence Eaton: and no wonder was it that such a fair and nymph-like being should be the cherished darling of her uncle and aunt, or be loved by them with as much tenderness as they could possibly have bestowed upon an only daughter. From the period when her orphan destiny consigned her to their care, they had reared her with the most watchful attention. A trustworthy and competent governess had taught her all useful knowledge and elegant accomplishments; and her readings had been selected by Lady Florimel herself. Every barrier, in a word, was raised up by the care of the excellent Pauline to protect her beloved niece from the pestilential atmosphere of the world's contamination; and yet all these precautions were managed with so much delicacy and tact, that Florence was never made to feel the slightest restraint. But then, so admirable were the teachings she received from her governess and so careful the inculcations of her aunt, that her mind became plastic to the purest thoughts and ductile to the chastest aspirations only.

Lord Florimel had been more than gay in his earlier years: he was a positive voluptuary in his amours, and was unwearied in his pursuit of pleasure. But such men often make exemplary husbands, and assuredly the best fathers or guardians. So it was with Gabriel Florimel. He had sown his wild oats when young: but from the day of his marriage, his conduct—nay, his very character—appeared to have undergone a complete change. Ah! he was one of those men who can appreciate and who learn to bless the example of a pure-minded

wife! For such was his Pauline: and all the salutary and heavenly influence which a virtuous woman must ever exercise in her special sphere, as a clear-burning lamp lights up the space around, had wrought its beneficent effects upon the mind of Lord Florimel. He loved his wife, because she was a pattern of every female virtue: and he loved his home, because she made it happy. He would not have deceived her for worlds: no temptation could possibly have rendered him faithless to one so good, so pure, so loving. And thus was he not only an excellent husband to a most deserving lady, but also a kind, careful, and affectionate guardian to a charming niece.

The Florimels mingled not much in the gaiety of the fashionable world; and their circle of acquaintances was rather select than brilliant. They never appeared at Court: for there were family circumstances which led them to forbear even from mentioning the name of the Prince Regent save when compelled by the turn which others might give to the conversation. For before her marriage with the Honourable Mr. Eaton (afterwards Lord Marchmont) Octavia, Pauline's elder sister, had fallen a victim to the royal voluptuary; and Pauline herself had been outraged by his polluted overtures. The latter however, had spurned the dishonourable addresses of the man to whose lust her sister had so unhappily fallen a prey;—but although there were certain circumstances which prevented Lady Florimel from ever expressing her abhorrence of the Prince aloud, she did not the less entertain a deep loathing for him in her heart.

The Princess Sophia, one of the Royal Family, was however an occasional visitress at the mansion of Lord and Lady Florimel; and she was much attached to the Honourable Miss Florence Eaton. But her Royal Highness, who was no stranger to the amour which had taken place nineteen years previously between her elder brother and Pauline's sister, never mentioned that brother's name when dining or calling at the mansion in Piccadilly.

Having thus glanced at the affairs and position of the Florimel family, we may resume the thread of our narrative in due course.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon that we find the uncle, the aunt, and the niece seated together in the drawing-room. The two ladies were occupied with embroidery; while Lord Florimel was conversing with them. But the discourse was suddenly interrupted by a loud knock at the street-door; and in a few moments a domestic announced her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia.

This lady was about the same age as Pauline—that is to say, thirty-eight. Like Pauline, also, she was tall and finely formed: but her embonpoint had expanded into a far greater luxuriance, which, together with the traces of incipient wrinkles upon her countenance and the evident use of an artificial bloom on the cheeks, made her seem some years older. Still she was a splendid woman; and in her look and entire appearance there was that voluptuousness—that animal sensuousness—which has not failed to characterise every female scion of the family of George III. The lank light brown hair—the swimming blue eye—the fulness of the lips, ever slightly parted—the remarkable volume of the bosom—the somewhat rounded shoulders—and the just perceptible rolling in the gait,—these were the indications of that amorous disposition and warm temperament which the Princess Sophia possessed to so great a degree, and which have been traditionary amongst the females of the Royal Family.

After the exchange of the usual greetings, the Princess intimated to Lady Florimel that she desired to speak to her alone. His lordship and Florence accordingly withdrew to another apartment; and her Royal Highness was left alone with her friend Pauline.

The Princess continued silent, overwhelmed with the confusion which her thoughts at that moment excited: and Lady Florimel was at no loss to conjecture the topic upon which Sophia was about to speak.

"Nineteen years and upwards have now elapsed, my dear friend," said her Royal Highness at length, and speaking in a voice that was low and tremulous,—"yes, more than nineteen years, since I became a mother at the house which you and your deceased sister then inhabited in the Edgeware Road. You remember, Pauline, that my poor babe was consigned, at the moment of his birth, to a surgeon of the name of Thurston: and from that period until the present time I have never made the slightest inquiry concerning my offspring. Imagine not, however," continued the Princess, tears trickling down her cheeks, "that I have never bestowed a thought upon that hapless boy. Yes—Oh! yes—his image has frequently presented itself to my mind—and there have been moments of bitter, burning anguish, in which I have reproached myself as the most unnatural of mothers. But the dread of shame—the fear of exposure—the awful terror lest my frailty should be made public, have hitherto sealed my lips and induced me to bury the past as much as possible in oblivion."

Her Royal Highness paused and wiped away the tears that were now gushing from the eyes which they dimmed: and Lady Florimel said not a word. For her own generous heart felt that if *she* had ever become a mother—even though her child were the offspring of shame—she could not have abandoned it in the first instance, nor have neglected it so utterly for a period verging towards twenty years!

"Last night I had a dreadful dream," continued her Royal Highness, shuddering at the recollections which now surged up like an overwhelming tide in her brain. "Methought that I was wandering in a churchyard, where the tomb-stones gleamed white in the pale moon-beams, as if those monuments were formed of the bleached bones of the dead that lay in their wormy graves beneath. How I came thither, or with what object I was roving stealthily through the silent cemetery, my vision did not show. But I felt an icy coldness upon me, as if the hand of death lay immoveable upon my naked shoulder;—it was a chill that searched me through and through, penetrating to my very heart's core. Gradually I became aware that I was not alone in the churchyard; but that pale phantom shapes, dim and undefined, were seated upon the flat stones or standing behind the raised ones. A stupendous consternation was upon me: the cold light of the moon seemed to be a sort of transparent silver mist, filling the churchyard, so

that I beheld all surrounding objects as if through a thin veil of gauze or gossamer. And amidst this diaphanous filminess were seen those shadowy forms, like vapours assuming the shapes of the dead in their winding-sheets and cerements. I endeavoured to fly—but my feet became heavy as lead, and I was transfixed to the spot. I sought to close my eyes—but an invincible power compelled me to keep them open. And then, as I was thus forced to gaze upon the awful scene around, those phantom forms became more palpable; and stony eyes looked fixedly forth from the wrappings of the winding-sheets—and the faces of corpses appeared in the openings of these garments of the grave. Their long withered arms were stretched forth from those white cere-cloths—and lank, lean, skinny fingers were all pointed towards me. Oh! it was horrible—horrible! But slowly from the midst of the phantom throng a figure came forth: and an icier chill struck to my heart's core, and a deeper horror crept over me,—for the revelation of the mysterious vision seemed to be at hand. That figure advanced gradually—gradually: and when it was within a few yards of the spot where I was standing, it slowly threw back the white winding-sheet, and revealed the countenance of my departed sister Amelia. O Pauline!" continued the Princess, "you know how well—how fervently I loved that affectionate sister! We had no secrets from each other: she was acquainted with my love for him who was the father of my child—and I was no stranger to the hapless love which she also cherished."

Pauline threw a look of surprise upon the royal lady; for this was the first time she had ever heard that the late Princess Amelia, whose death occurred between four and five years previously to the date of our tale, had experienced the sorrows of an unhappy love.

"Yes, my dear friend," continued the Princess Sophia, moved by her feelings to make a confidant of Lady Florimel, and experiencing the solace that always soothes the bosom which is enabled to unburthen its woes to the ear of friendship,—"my sister Amelia loved as deeply, as tenderly, and as yieldingly as I have loved. She also became a mother: but the offspring of her shame did not survive its birth. The secret was known to our parents: and her afflictions conducted her to a premature grave. But on her death-bed, in her ravings, she revealed my own secret also—and then my unhappy father and indignant mother learnt that *both* their favourite daughters had disgraced and dishonoured them. Ah! that was a dreadful scene—my poor sister's death-bed: for the ravings of her delirium were terrible—terrible!"

And overpowered by her recollections, the Princess Sophia covered her face with her hands—bent forward—and gave way to a flood of tears and to agonising sobs.

"But let me hasten and finish my dreadful tale," she said, suddenly yielding to the consolations which Pauline now offered her with the tenderest interest and most touching sympathy: then wiping her eyes once more, the Princess continued as follows:—"I was explaining to you how it appeared to me in my vision of last night, that my dead sister came forth from amidst the throng of shadowy shapes in the churchyard. Her countenance was marble pale—but beautiful as when I beheld her a corpse the same day on which she died in November, 1810. The expression of her features now appeared serene but mournful; and fixing her glassy eyes upon me—those eyes that once shone with the living light of heaven's own blessed azure—she spoke in a low sweet voice, that was tremulously clear. I cannot repeat what the phantom said, although every word be graven indelibly upon my mind, as if seared with red hot iron upon my brain: but it is too horrible—oh! far too horrible to recapitulate! Suffice it to say that she assured me my son was still living—she reproached me for my unnatural neglect of the offspring of my love—and she bade me lose no time in seeking for the youth who has a right to call me *mother!* Then it seemed to me in my vision, that the faculty of speech, hitherto suspended, was restored to me; and I asked her if she were happier in another world than she had been in this. But, O God! no tongue can describe the excruciating anguish which now appeared to pass over her countenance, nor the dread horror which added its blighting, withering, chilling influence to the consternation which was already upon me. She bared her bosom: methought that her form became transparent—and I could see through her! A pale blue flame was playing around her heart—a flame which I knew to be unextinguishable and eternal! Then, as the anguish of torture was still usurping the place of that serenity which had previously appeared upon her countenance, she spoke again; and this time her words were thrilling as the ice-blast, and borne upon a breath that was raw and penetrating as the damps of the grave. Yes—she spoke: and her words were to the effect that heaven is not for the rich, the titled, and the great ones who enjoy every luxury upon earth—but for the poor, the wretched, and the miserable of this world. The revelation—that awful revelation—of the secrets of a posthumous sphere, struck upon me as a frightful warning and a dread foreboding of my own future fate: and a piercing shriek thrilled from my lips. The churchyard and all the phantom shapes vanished in a moment: and I awoke, bathed in a cold, clammy, and death-like perspiration."

"The vision was a shocking one," observed Lady Florimel: "but still it was only a dream. In a few days your Royal Highness will cease to think of it."

"No—it has made a profound impression upon me," returned Sophia: then, lowering her voice to a whisper, she said, "You are aware that ever since the death of my poor sister Amelia, my unhappy father's mind has been a blank? O Pauline! it was the dread revelation made upon her death-bed concerning myself, which helped to consummate the tremendous calamity and deprive his Majesty of reason. Must I not, then, feel that I am guilty—very guilty, Pauline?—and can you not understand how such a dream as that which I experienced last night, was only too well calculated to excite the most rending remorse—the keenest compunction? Ah! I can assure you, my dear friend, that I am very, very miserable: and it seems as if the finger of heaven itself had pointed out for me a particular course through the medium of that vision."

"To what does your Royal Highness allude?" asked Lady Florimel.

"To the necessity of instituting an immediate

inquiry after my son," returned the Princess: "that is, if he be indeed alive. My thoughts are now fixed upon that object——"

"And not for a moment can I dissuade your Royal Highness from so laudable a proceeding," exclaimed the excellent-hearted lady.

"But I do not propose to declare to him the secret of his birth," continued Sophia. "I wish you, my dear friend, to make the requisite inquiries on my behalf—to ascertain what he is and where he is—and to glean evey particular which you may imagine likely to interest a mother. Then may I become his secret benefactress—bestow all possible bounties upon him, without suffering him to learn the source whence they emanate—and do for him, in fine, as much as I can or dare perform. Now, will you aid me in this enterprise?"

"I will—most assuredly," answered Pauline. "I have every reason to believe that the Mr. Thurston to whom the child was consigned, is the same, eminent physician who lives in May Fair and who has obtained such renown in his profession. Years have however elapsed since I last saw him: but I will call upon him without delay."

"But he must not be acquainted with my secret, Pauline," said the Princess Sophia. "Unless indeed," she added, with a sigh, "he is already acquainted with it! And this is most probable: for he must have seen me—he must have recognized in me the lady who, under the name of Mrs. Mordaunt, became a mother at your former residence in the Edgeware Road, and whom he attended upon the occasion."

"At all events, if he be not acquainted with the secret," said Lady Florimel, "he shall not learn it from my lips. To one only person in the world have I ever breathed it—to one from whom my soul could keep nothing veiled——"

"I understand you, Pauline," observed the Princess, mournfully. "You mean your husband?

Oh! I do not blame you—I cannot be angry with you on that account. Had I become the happy wife of him whom I loved, I feel that I could have kept nothing from him. But your husband has preserved an inviolable secrecy?"

"Oh! inviolable," exclaimed Pauline. "Not for worlds would he breathe the tale to mortal ears! His honour is beyond all question!"

"You are happy—supremely happy in the possession of such a husband, Pauline," said the Princess Sophia. "So far as the indulgence of the heart's best and purest affections is concerned, my life is an impenetrable blank. Not for me may beam the smiles of a fond husband—not upon the pathway of my existence may the sunny eyes of innocent children shed their ineffable light! Chained to my royal destiny, I am compelled to mingle in the splendours, the pomps, the luxuries, and the ostentations of a Court: but those chains which thus bind me are galling and scathing, golden though they be! I am caressed—courted—flattered: but no particle of that adulation can give balm to my aching heart—my burning brain! Every eye contemplates me with respect: Oh! could those looks penetrate deep down into the profundities of my soul, they would find naught to envy there! When I know that I am the centre of all attraction in the brilliant assembly of rank, wealth, and fashion, that lofty elevation which to other women would be the proudest triumph, is to me the veriest mockery of my matchless, immitigable woe! The smiles that I force myself to lavish upon the gay and giddy throngs which then surround me, may appear to beam with the heart's happiness: but the efforts which they cost me are purchased with the agony of life itself. Or if for a brief space I do at times outstrip the whirl of crucifying remembrances, the reprieve is but short: on, on tear the harrowing recollections—they overtake me—engulf me in their furious sweep—fix their vulture-talons upon my heart—and shoot like millions of red-hot needles through my brain. For I feel that I am guilty—I know that my frailty and shame have entered into the causes which extinguished the light of my unhappy father's reason: I know also that my sister Amelia was very guilty—and that her love was characterised by circumstances of an appalling horror! Yes—my dear Pauline, I will tell you everything *now*. Know, then, that in his youth my father—the King of England—loved a beauteous creature—a certain Hannah Lightfoot, of whom you have doubtless heard. A son was the issue of that amour: and by a strange combination of circumstances, he was adopted by a baronet and his wife, who passed him off as their own son. He succeeded to their title and property: he became that Sir Richard Stamford whose misfortunes created so deep a sensation about nineteen years ago. Alas! he it was who gained my sister Amelia's love—he it was to whom she surrendered her virtue—and he was the father of her child which perished at its birth!"

"Her own half-brother!" said Pauline, with a cold tremor and in a subdued tone.

"He was—he was," returned the Princess. "And now, think you not that the reminiscences which often goad me almost to madness, are harrowing to a degree? A spell is upon the family to which I belong, Pauline—a spell that has stricken my father, my brothers, my sisters, and myself—a spell that often sends the shudder of death throughout my entire frame!"

"Talk not thus despondingly, I implore you," said Lady Florimel, in a voice of tender entreaty. "You are unhappy—and heaven knows you have enough to embitter your existence. But your Royal Highness will experience solace and comfort from the resolution which you have taken concerning your son: and to-morrow I will enter upon the inquiry which your Royal Highness has entrusted in my hands."

"Do so, dear Pauline: and write to me the moment you obtain the requisite information."

The Princess then embraced Lady Florimel with affectionate gratitude, and took her departure, somewhat soothed by the outpourings of her sorrows into the bosom of a faithful friend. Nor did she regret having suffered the tide of her feelings to hurry her into such delicate revelations to Pauline's ear: for the secrets to which her lips had thus given utterance, constituted a burthen too tremendous for her heart to bear alone any longer.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE TWO PHYSICIANS.

It was about one o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the above scene; and Dr. Thurston was sitting at lunch in an elegantly-furnished parlour of his mansion in May Fair. His wife had gone out in the carriage to make some morning-calls; but the Doctor was not alone—for a brother-member of the faculty was keeping him company at the well-spread table.

Dr. Thurston was now in his sixtieth year. He had grown stout, sleek, and had a comfortable well-to-do appearance. The crown of his head was completely bald; and he wore powder. His eyes had a somewhat sinister, sharp, restless expression: but he could assume all the bland smiles and paternal benevolence of the fashionable physician, so that the disagreeable peculiarity of his regards was scarcely noticed.

His friend was Dr. Copperas, who was quite as celebrated as Thurston himself, and enjoyed an equal amount of practice. In fact, they had for years played into each other's hands, rendering mutual assistance in filling their pockets and puffing each other off. If Thurston had a difficult or dangerous case, he would of course suggest a consultation; and when requested to name some eminent practitioner to be called in, he would say, "Really I am loath to offer my advice upon the point: but every one knows that Dr. Copperas has made *this* malady his particular study." On the other hand, Dr. Copperas, when similarly situated, would observe after a little apparent reflection, "Well, I really don't know; but if I must name some eminent gentleman, I think that Dr. Thurston should be the one—for he excels in the treatment of *this* particular disease." Thus, according to the opinions which the two doctors were wont to pass upon each other, they had both made every malady under the sun their special study, and both excelled in the treatment of every physical evil to which flesh is heir.

If Dr. Thurston wrote an article in a medical

publication, he would introduce some such sentence as the following:—"And in this view of the nature and treatment of the disease, I am fully borne out by the testimony and experience of Dr. Copperas, who will pardon me for thus introducing his name into the disquisition." On the other hand, Dr. Copperas, when communicating an extraordinary case to a medical periodical, would not fail to observe that "the instance is not altogether unknown in the experience of the faculty, one of equal difficulty having some time since come under the cognizance of that eminent physician, Dr. Thurston, who was most successful in treating it upon the same plan."

Again, when Dr. Thurston published a bulky medical work, the little annotation of "See Dr. Copperas on Dispepsia," was frequently observed at the bottom of a page, with the usual asterisk: and when Dr. Copperas issued *his* book, the annotation of "See Dr. Thurston on Antiphlogistic Treatment," occurred in a similar manner. Moreover, Dr. Thurston dedicated his great work on the *Treatment of Carditis and Pericarditis* to Dr. Copperas, "as a humble tribute of admiration and respect;" and Dr. Copperas dedicated his bulky volume on *Phlebotomy* to Dr. Thurston, "as a humble tribute of respect and admiration."

When a vacancy occurred in the medical staff of the Prince Regent's household, Dr. Thurston was quite surprised that Dr. Copperas should have been passed over: while, on the other hand, Dr. Copperas was convinced that hole-and-corner work could alone have prevented Dr. Thurston from obtaining the appointment. If ever the King's malady happened to be mentioned when Dr. Thurston was calling upon a patient, he would be sure to shake his head solemnly and express a deep regret that the Royal Family had not thought fit to avail themselves of the eminent skill of Dr. Copperas: while, on his side, and under similar circumstances, Dr. Copperas would mysteriously hint that it was people's own fault if they didn't apply in the right quarter, as for instance to such a man as Dr. Thurston.

Thus Dr. Thurston hurled Dr. Copperas at the head of his patients; and Dr. Copperas as zealously flung Dr. Thurston at them:—so that Thurston be-puffed Copperas, and Copperas be-praised Thurston—and Thurston and Copperas, and Copperas and Thurston were invariably mentioned in the same breath by their patients in private and medical journals in public—and thus Thurston made Copperas, and Copperas made Thurston, until the most extensive West-end practice was monopolised between Thurston and Copperas.

On the occasion when we now find Dr. Copperas lunching with Dr. Thurston, they had just returned from a consultation; and having each pocketed a fifty guinea fee and seen their patient close his eyes for ever upon this world, they were in the best possible humour for a good luncheon.

"I am going to send an article on *Diabetes* to the *Medical Reformer* next week," observed Dr. Copperas, as he held a glass of sherry up before his eyes to delight them with the colour before he regaled his tongue with the taste; "and I mean to cut up Dr. Colycynth's theory hip and thigh."

"No—don't do that, my dear friend," said Thurston: "for Colycynth has spoken well of me in his *Essay on Hydrargyrum cum Creta*."

"Oh! that alters the case altogether," observed Copperas, sipping his wine. "I will laud him to the skies. But, by the bye, how gets on the article relative to *Siliagogues?*"

"I have nearly finished it," answered Thurston; "and mean to wind up with a complete exposure of Dr. Hartshorn."

"Don't think of it, my dear friend," exclaimed Copperas, in dismay. "Why, Hartshorn has quoted six pages from my book on *Phlebotomy*."

"Well, I am glad you have mentioned it," said Thurston. "I will take care to pay him a high compliment. By the bye, Professor Gargle never alluded to either of us in his last Course of Lectures."

"No—the same thing struck me," remarked Copperas. "We must run him down. I will attack him in my forthcoming article on *Diabetes;* and you must pronounce him a perfect ignoramus with regard to *Siliagogues*."

"Agreed," said Thurston. "But what about Dr. Sago?"

"Oh! he sent me a brace of grouse with a very polite note last year, and a fine turbot the other day," answered Copperas. "You must let him alone. But if you choose to level a side-blow at that aspiring young fellow Febrifuge, who has just set up his one-horse chaise——"

"No—we won't be hard upon him," interrupted Thurston: "he took off his hat to me the other day."

"Oh! very well," remarked Copperas: "then we'll let him alone."

At this moment the door opened, and a footman entered.

"If you please, sir," said the domestic, "a person named Tomkins—a linen-draper in St. James's Street—wants to know whether you can visit his wife immediately——"

"A linen-draper—Oh! no," interrupted Dr. Thurston, with a contemptuous sneer.

"I should think not indeed," observed Dr. Copperas, pouring out another glass of wine. "What's the matter with the woman?"

"Never mind what's the matter with her," said Thurston. "Tell the husband, William, that I am very sorry—but that Dr. Copperas is engaged with me at present in earnest consultation upon a most difficult case, which I cannot possibly leave."

"Yes, sir," answered the footman: and he quitted the room.

"A paltry five guinea fee, I suppose," said Thurston, as he helped himself to some pigeon-pie.

In a few minutes William reappeared.

"Please, sir," he said, addressing himself to Dr. Copperas, "your servant has just come over to say that one Brisket, a butcher in Piccadilly, has sent for you immediately: his father has fallen down in an apoplectic fit——"

"A butcher indeed!" ejaculated Dr. Copperas. "I wonder what the world is coming to next! Let my servant say that I have been called in by Dr. Thurston in a matter of the utmost importance, and that I am totally unable to attend upon Mr. Brisket."

"Yes, sir," replied the footman: and he again withdrew.

The doctors continued to eat, and drink, and converse as comfortably as if no linen-draper's wife was dangerously ill or no butcher's father in an

apoplectic fit;—and when luncheon was over, Dr. Copperas took his leave to pay his afternoon's round of visits and seek every opportunity of running down Professor Gargle, according to agreement with his friend.

Dr. Thurston was also thinking of going out on *his* tour, when a carriage drove up to the door, and a lady alighted. The footman showed her up to the drawing-room, and then hastened to inform his master that Lady Florimel desired to see him.

"Lady Florimel!" muttered the physician to himself, as he ascended to the drawing-room. "Ah! I recollect: she was one of those Miss Clarendons who used to live in the Edgeware Road, and at whose house——"

But as his musings reached this point his fingers were upon the handle of the drawing-room door; and putting on his most physician-like look and his best professional smile, he entered the apartment.

"I believe that I may have the honour of claiming your ladyship as an acquaintance of former times," he said, bowing with mingled solemnity and urbanity: and he then seated himself near Pauline.

"It is many years since we met, Dr. Thurston," observed the lady: "and the object of my visit is relative to a certain incident—an incident which you cannot possibly have forgotten——"

"Ah! I know what your ladyship means!" said the physician, in a subdued voice of mystery: and his countenance fell.

"Is *he* alive, Dr. Thurston?" asked Pauline, a deep misgiving smiting her at the moment as she observed that sudden alteration in the physician's looks.

"Lady Florimel," was the answer, delivered with much evident uneasiness, "I am utterly unable to give you any information respecting that child—who indeed would be a young man now, if alive——"

"Dr. Thurston," said Pauline, surveying him suspiciously, "what means this singular—this unaccountable—this alarming manner in which you speak of the being confided to your care?"

"Hear me patiently—judge not hastily!" exclaimed Thurston. "The affair may seem suspicious: but I take God to witness mine innocence of any harm or neglect towards that child! It was stolen—stolen from its nurse in its infancy——"

"Stolen!" echoed Pauline. "Ah! and the mother is now anxious to hear tidings concerning him!"

"Her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia!" said Thurston, in a low deep tone: then, perceiving by Lady Florimel's countenance that he was not in error, he continued, "A few months after I removed to May Fair, which is upwards of nineteen years ago—soon after the child was entrusted to me—I saw her Royal Highness riding in her carriage in the park; and I felt assured that she was indeed none other than the Mrs. Mordaunt of the Edgeware Road."

"I do not—I will not—attempt to deny the truth of this discovery," said Pauline. "The religious inviolability with which you have kept so grave and important a secret, Dr. Thurston, convinces me of your honour—your integrity—your conscientiousness; and I beseech your pardon for the momentary manifestation of suspicion which I may have shown. Pray tell me, then, how the unfortunate child was lost."

"A few months after it was entrusted to my care," said the doctor, "the nurse was one day taking it out for the accustomed airing in Hyde Park, when a ferocious-looking man and a boy stole the babe from her. But the man used the most horrible threats. He declared that the child should be reared in the stews of vice and the dens of infamy—that he should be trained in all the hideous ways of demoralization—and when, on the lapse of years, his mind had become thoroughly imbued with these dreadful teachings, he should be restored to me. From that moment, however, no intelligence of the lost one has reached me."

"Oh! this is indeed frightful—frightful," exclaimed Lady Florimel, with a cold shudder. "Let us hope that the unfortunate victim died in his infancy, rather than that the hideous intentions of that monster should have been fulfilled!"

"That dreadful man doubtless thought he was stealing my own child," observed the physician: "for he had conceived a spite against me for reasons which I need not now explain. I never heard of him afterwards. At the time, I gave information to the authorities—circulated hand-bills offering a reward for the recovery of the child—and adopted all imaginable means to regain the hapless lost one. But I forebore from advertising my own name in the matter, for fear the incident should come to the knowledge of the child's mother, whose real name and rank I did not then know. Here is one of the proofs of my statement."

And unlocking a writing-desk, Thurston displayed to Pauline one of the printed bills of which he had just spoken, and which bore the date of June, 1795.

"What am I to do?—what course can I adopt?" asked Lady Florimel, profoundly affected. "I cannot reveal the tremendous truth to the Princess—and I cannot stoop to a falsehood? What is to be done, Dr. Thurston?"

"I know not how to advise your ladyship," said the physician. "But I must inform you that I have many times thought of renewing the inquiry after the lost one. There is at this moment at the head of the London constabulary, a man of extraordinary tact and discernment, and whose fame in his special sphere has never been excelled—scarcely equalled. I allude to Mr. Sampson, the Bow Street officer—an individual whose respectability I believe unimpeachable, and who might be entrusted with the investigation of this delicate matter."

"But it is not necessary to inform him that the subject of the inquiry is the son of her Royal Highness?" said Lady Florimel.

"Assuredly not," returned the physician. "I will represent to Mr. Sampson that the youth, if he be alive, is my own son; and I will proffer a thousand guineas as a reward for his discovery."

"I rely upon your taking these measures without delay," said Pauline. "In the meantime I must reveal the truth to her Royal Highness, suppressing however the dreadful threats which were uttered at the time by the man who stole the child."

"And I will at once repair to Bow Street and obtain an interview with Mr. Lawrence Sampson," observed the physician.

Lady Florimel then took her departure.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE MONEY-LENDER.

The scene changes to the office of a bill-broker and discounter in Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street. The front door of the house stood open during business-hours—that is to say, from nine till five; and upon the circular ground-glass window of an inner door, which swung either way upon its hinges, was painted the name of "Mr. Emmerson."

In a front office a clerk and a boy were seated at a desk; and a door, with the word "Private" upon it, opened into a well furnished room where Mr. Emmerson himself sate at a table covered with papers. Several handsome pictures were suspended to the walls; and upon a side-table stood a number of sample-bottles, containing various sorts of wine.

Mr. Emmerson was a man of about forty—well dressed—with a diamond pin in his shirt-frill, a handsome gold-chain festooning over his figured silk waistcoat, and a brilliant ring upon each hand. He was dark-haired—of sallow complexion—and hard-featured: his looks denoted the money-grubber and driver of close bargains—while his general appearance indicated flourishing circumstances. He had a splendid house at Clapham—drove to town in his phaeton in the morning—and had his close carriage to fetch him home to dinner in the evening. He had a wife and daughter who dressed elegantly and gave themselves no small amount of airs: and his entertainments at Clapham were of the most magnificent description. For Mr. Emmerson was a man of note in the City: he was already a member of the Common Council, and hoped to be an Alderman shortly.

His connexion, however, lay as much at the West End as in the vicinage of the Royal Exchange—as much with the extravagant young men and dissipated aristocrats who lounged up Bond Street, as with the traders and retailers eastward of Temple Bar. In fact, Mr. Emmerson never refused business when he saw his way pretty clear, no matter who the applicants for money might be, nor from which quarter they came.

Being a rank Tory and a rich man, Mr. Emmerson was of course held up as a person of the highest respectability. No one ventured to breathe a word relative to the slimy ways and usurious practices by which he obtained his wealth. He was a professing Christian—indeed, a very severe one: but the most maligned, persecuted, and contemned Jew never drove harder bargains than this churchgoing Protestant. He was constantly interlarding his discourse with parenthetic eulogies of our "glorious Constitution," our "admirable laws," and the "blessings of English civilization;"—and there is no doubt he was sincere enough in his encomiums. For it was this same glorious Constitution which created and sustained the awfully vitiated condition of society that led the extravagant man, the dupe, or the struggling tradesman to have recourse to such usurers and money-grubbers as Mr. Emmerson: it was those same admirable laws which gave impunity to his practices, instead of causing him to be whipped at the cart's tail;—and the influence of our blessed civilization was seen in the fact that such a wretch rolled in his carriage and revelled in all the luxuries of life, while the honest working-man was crushed with the fatigues of incessant toil and was half-starved upon the scantiest and poorest fare.

Such, however, was Mr. Emmerson: and now that we have afforded our readers some insight into his character, we will endeavour to do the same in respect to his practices.

We have already said that a clerk and a boy were seated in the front office. The clerk was a young man of about four-and-twenty—tall, well-made, and tolerably good-looking. He dressed with a certain neatness which was entirely devoid of pretension: his linen was always remarkably clean, and denoted the superintendence of some careful female hand. Yet he was not married: but he had an only sister—a beautiful girl of about seventeen—to whom he was devotedly attached, and for whose sake he had hitherto remained single. They were orphans; and in the house where they rented a couple of rooms, they were looked upon with the highest respect by the landlady and their fellow-lodgers. Although the sister obtained a trifle by her skill with the needle, their principal means of support were derived from the brother's salary, which was however only a guinea a-week. Yet Mr. Emmerson insisted that his clerk should always appear well dressed, "in order to do credit to his situation"—and most probably to create a belief that he was handsomely paid by his master!

The boy in the front office was about fourteen, and received seven shillings a-week. *He* also was bound "to look respectable"—in other words, to wear clothes the cost of which would absorb his entire salary, leaving nothing towards helping his parents to keep him.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when we thus introduce our readers to Mr. Emmerson's office in Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street.

Having carefully examined some accounts, the bill-broker suddenly started from his seat and rang a silver hand bell which stood upon the table. The boy instantaneously answered the summons; and Emmerson said in a cold stern voice, "Tell Mr. Varian to step in." The boy retired—and the next moment the clerk stood in his master's presence.

"Shut the door, Varian," said Emmerson, with a more than usual abruptness of manner.

The clerk instantly saw that something was wrong; and he was glad of the opportunity to turn aside for the moment in order to conceal the confusion which seized upon him. But having closed the door of communication between the two offices, he was again compelled to confront his master, whose eyes were fixed upon him with a coldly searching look that turned the young man's heart into ice to its very core.

"Mr. Varian," said Emmerson, still in that freezing tone which appeared pitiless and relentless: "there is something wrong in your accounts. Have the kindness to explain it:"—and the bill-broker leant back against the mantel-piece with the air of a man who feels that he has got a fellow-creature in his power, and means to crush him.

"Something wrong, sir?" stammered Theodore Varian, now stooping down as if to look at the papers upon the table, but in reality to hide his increasing confusion.

"Yes, sir—and not one error only—but several," continued Mr. Emmerson. "Those papers contain your accounts for petty cash and office disbursements for the last three months; and I discover numerous *mistakes*," he continued, with a malignant emphasis upon the word, "averaging ten shillings a-week. The total amount of these *mistakes* is six pounds sterling."

"I am very sorry, sir—I—I shall be most happy to make the amount good," stammered Theodore, now raising his countenance, which was very pale and had a wild frightened look. "You can deduct from my salary——"

"Stop a moment, sir," exclaimed Mr. Emmerson, sternly. "Finding such errors in the last three months' accounts, I had the curiosity to inspect those of the previous quarter—and also of the quarter before that——"

A subdued moan convulsed the breast of the unhappy young man: and staggering a pace or two, he grasped the back of a chair to prevent himself from falling.

"In fact," continued Mr. Emmerson, his looks and his voice increasing, if possible, in severity, "for a year past, Mr. Varian, you have been making *mistakes* to an agregate amount of twenty-four or twenty-five pounds; and I am sorry to be compelled to add that these errors are so ingeniously mystified in your accounts as to prove that they were *not* accidental. You have been five years in my service—and perhaps, if I were to go over your accounts for the first four years I should discover similar defalcations to those which characterise the last."

"No, sir—on my honour, you will not!" exclaimed Theodore, with an earnestness that brought the colour to his pale cheeks for an instant.

"Ah! then they are not mistakes," said Emmerson, with a sneer; "and you admit that they are defalcations—wilful plunderings?"

"Sir, I cannot—I will not attempt to deny it," returned Theodore, speaking in a low voice and with profound agitation of manner. "I will not add falsehood to my other offence—an offence to which I plead guilty, and for which I implore your mercy."

"Then, sir, you confess that you have been systematically robbing me for a year past?" observed the bill-broker. "But, thank God! we live in a country where the laws are so admirably contrived and so justly administered, under the guarantee of our blessed Constitution, that a master can punish his faithless servant."

"I hope, sir—I implore—I beseech, that you will not ruin me," said Varian, bursting into tears and clasping his hands in the agony of earnest entreaty. "Thousands and thousands of pounds of your money, sir, have passed through my hands—and the extreme of my defalcations is the amount you have named."

"But he who steals a penny, sir, will steal a pound," replied Emmerson, sternly: "and I owe to the special providence of that heaven which watches over me, the timely discovery of your misdeeds."

"Pray grant me your attention for a few minutes, sir," exclaimed the unhappy Theodore; "and do not—oh! do not make up your mind to any sudden harshness. I take to witness, sir, that heaven whereof you have spoken, that I am not naturally bad. Inquire of my landlady—inquire of my fellow-lodgers and neighbours—inquire of the tradesmen with whom I deal—and you will find, sir, that I am neither extravagant nor unsteady. I live with the strictest economy—and never have I once been late in my attendance at your office. But last winter, sir, my sister had a long and severe illness—my poor sister," continued the young man, large tears rolling down his cheeks, "who will be heart-broken if she hears of my disgrace! She was at the point of death, sir—and I was compelled to obtain a nurse for her, as well as constant medical attendance. You remember, sir, that I besought you to grant me a month's leave of absence—in which case I should myself have nursed her. But you told me that if I quitted you for any cause save illness on my own part, I might remain away altogether. Well, sir, my sister recovered, thanks to the attentions by which I surrounded her: but I was ruined by the expenses. I set aside half my salary to pay the debts thus incurred: and my poor sister and I lived upon ten shillings a week. Ah! sir, it was hard to see her want necessaries, at a time when she required strengthening aliment and every comfort. I used to tell her that I dined with friends, while I in reality ate a piece of dry bread, in order to afford her a sufficiency of food. But the surgeon clamoured for his bill—and then, as my clothes grew shabby, you told me that unless I could contrive to appear respectable in your service, I must leave. It was under all these distressing circumstances, Mr. Emmerson, that I became a defaulter; and the dread of detection sharpened my otherwise inexperienced ingenuity in playing the deceiver and falsifying the accounts with so much apparent cunning. I have now told you all—and I throw myself upon your mercy."

"Mercy, indeed!" echoed the bill-broker, with a scornful chuckle. "What would become of this vast emporium of commerce—this mart for the merchandize of the universe—this centre of civilization—if the law did not protect property and demand the surrender of those who offend against it?"

"Oh! sir," exclaimed Varian, in an imploring voice, "mercy, leniency, and forbearance are the elements of a true condition of civilization!"

"But I owe a duty to society, sir," rejoined the bill-broker, sharply: "and that duty must be discharged! Speaking, however, of your sister, she seemed quite well when she called the other day to bring you a letter."

"Did you not observe that she was pale and delicate?" inquired Varian. "But doubtless you took little notice of her——"

"What is her name?" demanded Emmerson, abruptly.

"Ariadne, sir," was the reply.

"Ah! a classic name—eh?" observed the bill-broker, with an accent of sarcasm: then, in a different tone and with musing manner, he said, "She is a well-looking girl—with pleasing manners and modest appearance—a very beautiful girl, indeed——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Theodore, a ray of hope now gleaming in unto his soul,—"do not, then, break the heart of this poor friendless girl whose merits you have not failed to perceive! She is wholly and entirely dependent upon me, Mr. Emmerson—and the shock produced by my dishonour would prove a mortal blow to poor Ariadne!"

"But you should have thought of all this at

first, Mr. Varian," said the bill-broker, his voice again becoming stern and his manner severe. "Do you know to what you have exposed yourself?"

"Too well—too well, sir," cried Theodore, the gleam of hope suddenly extinguishing in his breast and despair once again resuming its place.

"It is in my power to call in a constable," proceeded Emmerson, "and give you into custody. You would then be dragged before the magistrate—committed to Newgate—tried in due course—and sentenced to a heavy punishment. But this would not be all. With a blasted character—a ruined reputation—your sister in the workhouse, or perhaps on the town——"

"Heavens, sir—do not continue this appalling picture!" cried Varian, shivering and shuddering from head to foot, while his countenance became ghastly with the terror of his excruciating thoughts. "In the name of God spare me!—in mercy spare me!"—and he fell upon his knees before his master.

"There is one condition—and only one, upon which I will spare you!" responded Emmerson, in a low deep voice, while his lips trembled and his own cheek blanched at the tremendous turpitude of the thought to which his ungovernable passions nevertheless compelled him to give utterance.

"And that one condition, sir?" exclaimed Theodore, joyfully catching at this return of hope. "What is it?" he demanded, still kneeling.

"That you surrender your sister to my arms," was the reply.

"Monster!" ejaculated the young man, springing to his feet as if he were suddenly electrified. "But no—I did not hear aright—I have done you an injustice—or else you are endeavouring to put my principles to the test——"

"Enough of this ranting, sir!" exclaimed Emmerson, abruptly. "You have heard my decision—I never joke—I care nothing what your principles may be outside the doors of this office. Choose therefore at once:—is it to be your sister to my arms, or yourself to Newgate?"

Theodore Varian gazed upon his master with the bewilderment and wildness of one who is ready to go mad with ineffable anguish. He could scarcely believe it possible that the cold, phlegmatic, church-going man of business could either conceal so much burning lust beneath the mask of hypocrisy, or so far falsify all his professions of strict morality and veneration of the law by daring to propound so tremendous a crime. But the longer he gazed upon his master, the more convinced did he become that such was indeed the fact: and almost heart-broken, the young man fell upon a seat and burst into a perfect convulsion of uncontrollable anguish.

Stern, pitiless, and without remorse, did the money-grubbing Emmerson—that satyr in the garb of sanctimoniousness and respectability—contemplate Theodore Varian. He hated the young man, because he knew him to be fundamentally virtuous and well-principled, despite the peculations of which he had been guilty: and, on the other hand, he cherished an insatiable desire to possess the lovely Ariadne. Moreover, Emmerson could not help feeling how really mean, despicable, and false he himself was, although no man could proclaim any definite misdeed against him,—in comparison with Theodore Varian, notwitstanding the defalcations which, if published to the world, would blacken his character for ever. Therefore was it that Mr. Emmerson experienced a fiend's malignant joy at having gotten the young man so completely into his power.

"Is it possible, sir," inquired Theodore, the first strong fever of his harrowing anguish having somewhat subsided,—"is it possible that you mean what you say?"

"It is quite possible—it is probable:—nay, more—it is true," was the dread response. "And let us not bandy words—for I have well weighed all the consequences of my proposal. You may think to unmask me: but who would believe so outrageous a tale against a man of my respectability and austere morals—especially when that tale is told by my clerk who has robbed me? Any magistrate—any judge in the land—any jury, in fine, would tell you that you only aggravated your enormity by so preposterous an attempt to blacken my character, which is unimpeachable. Then again, you may think to escape from London, taking your sister with you: but I would spend a thousand pounds to advertise your personal description in such a manner that no disguise of dress and no feigned name should protect you against discovery. Choose, then, whether it shall be Newgate on the one hand—or a compliance with my conditions on the other. If the former," added Mr. Emmerson, laying his hand upon the silver bell, "the boy shall fetch a constable at once: if the latter, then I give you three days to prepare your sister for the sacrifice which she is to make of her honour in order to save your's."

Every word of this diabolical address struck like a sledge-hammer upon the head and pierced like a fiery arrow to the heart of the unhappy Theodore. He saw the truth of all the cold, measured, fiendish calculations of his master: and it was a wonder that he did not go raving mad then and there! But he was too young in the ways of the world, and naturally of too sanguine and buoyant a disposition, to despair altogether: and in the latter alternative offered him, he had three days' delay. How much could be done—how much might transpire in his favour—in three days! At all events, he would have that period to deliberate more calmly than he could possibly do now: and then, his master might relent!

"Well, sir—what is your decision?" demanded Emmerson, after a pause, and keeping his hand still upon the bell.

"The latter alternative," was Varian's reply, delivered in a hollow voice and with ghastly countenance.

"Be it so," said Emmerson. "And now take a glass of wine—for you must not return to your desk with those looks that will make the boy suspect something."

Thus speaking, the money-lender filled a glass from one of the sample-bottles, and handed it to Theodore, who drank its contents with avidity: for he did indeed experience the want of a stimulus at that moment.

Then, having somewhat composed his looks, he returned into the front office.

A few minutes afterwards the Earl of Curzon called, and was immediately shown by the boy into the bill-broker's private room.

"Well, Emmerson," said the Earl, flinging him-

self negligently upon a chair and tapping the toe of his boot with his riding-whip, as he stretched out his legs in a *nonchalant* manner,—"any news in the City?"

"Nothing particular, my lord. Only a very animated discussion yesterday in the Common Council. I presume your lordship has read my speech in this morning's paper?"

"Upon my honour, Emmerson, I had not time. What was the discussion about?" inquired the Earl, languidly.

"On the propriety of erecting a new pump in Aldgate, my lord," answered Emmerson. "The matter has created immense excitement in the City, I can assure you; and the hall was crowded to excess. Such eloquence was never put forth on any former occasion: it was more than enough to make even the House of Commons jealous. And I flatter myself that I came out pretty strong in denouncing the job. I spoke for three hours without stopping. The Lord Mayor listened all the time with his eyes shut—so deep was the impression that I made. Mr. Under-sheriff Fire—a perky cock-sparrow little fellow, who abounds in conceit and fancies himself a great orator—endeavoured to answer me: but he made a miserable failure. Then Mr. Richard Baylor—a terrible prosy old owl, who puts himself up as an authority in all City matters and sometimes attempts to be facetious—followed on the same side as Fire: but it was all to no purpose. I carried my motion against the new pump by an overwhelming majority; and afterwards received the congratulations of everybody on 'Change for my spirited conduct."

"Well," said Curzon, who had listened with exemplary patience to this long narrative, in order to put the bill-broker into a good humour, "you did wonders, certainly. But is your conduct spirited enough to lend me some money?"

"Very likely it is, my lord," said Emmerson, smiling. "How much do you want?—for how long?—and on what security?"

"A couple of thousand guineas—for six months—and on my promissory note," answered the Earl, replying to the queries with categorical brevity.

"But your lordship has already a great many liabilities," observed Emmerson.

"A few debts—nothing to speak of—that's all," said the nobleman, carelessly.

"How, a few debts?" exclaimed the money-lender, looking hard at the Earl. "And no bills of exchange—no acceptances—already in the market?"

"Not one, on my oath!" cried Curzon, emphatically.

"Not one?—not a single one?" remarked Emmerson, apparently staggered by the Earl's declaration. "Pray reflect, my lord. No accommodation bills to serve a friend——"

"I defy you, my dear fellow, to bring such a folly home to me," exclaimed Curzon. "I have been silly and reckless enough as it is, without having to plead guilty to such downright madness. Once for all, then, I tell you that I have no bills out. If anybody has told you that I have, it was an atrocious falsehood: and if any have been brought to you to discount, they are forgeries. Now will you believe me?"

"As a matter of course, my lord," responded Emmerson, still surveying the Earl with singular and almost suspicious looks.

"Why do you regard me in this manner?" demanded the nobleman. "I tell you again that I am too old a bird upon town to accept accommodation-bills for anybody. I want accommodation myself, and could not think of giving it to others. It is true I have been asked to join friends on several occasions in raising money: but I have always refused. General Beechey asked me some time ago—young George Sefton, who was killed by Dysart in the duel, asked me—Dysart himself, who, by the bye, was arrested yesterday morning and lodged in Newgate, has asked me—Malpas has asked me——"

"Ah! Colonel Malpas has asked your lordship?" said the bill-broker. "And you invariably refused—Malpas and all?"

"I invariably refused," returned the nobleman. "Beechey's difficulties were well known to me—young Sefton had not a penny piece to bless himself with—Dysart is a thorough scamp—and I have not a very high opinion of Malpas. I therefore refused them all."

"Your lordship has certainly acted with much prudence," observed Mr. Emmerson, resuming his wonted cold business-like tone and manner. "Be kind enough to draw up the promissory note at six months," he continued, taking a bill-stamp from a portfolio; "and I will write you a cheque for seventeen hundred guineas. Your lordship will draw the note for two thousand."

"What! you are going to charge me three hundred for discount?" exclaimed the nobleman. "It is far too much. I can obtain the accommodation elsewhere, at a much cheaper rate."

"Then pray apply elsewhere, my lord," said Emmerson coolly.

"Be it so," observed the Earl, rising. "Good afternoon:"—and, taking up his hat, he was walking towards the door.

"One moment, my lord," exclaimed the bill-broker, who was now perfectly satisfied that the nobleman's need was not so desperate as to induce him to pay an exorbitant discount for the money he required. "How much will you give?"

"A couple of hundred guineas for the accommodation—and not a farthing more," replied the Earl of Curzon.

"Well, I suppose I must accommodate your lordship," said the money-lender;—and he sate down to write a draft upon his banker.

The Earl filled up the promissory note—received the cheque—and withdrew, humming an opera air. The moment he had retired, Emmerson opened a cash-box, took forth several bills of exchange, and compared the writing of the acceptance with that of the promissory note just signed by the nobleman.

"Yes—they are unquestionably forgeries," he muttered to himself, as he returned the bills to the cash-box.

A few minutes afterwards the boy entered to announce Colonel Malpas.

"Ah! my dear Emmerson," said the visitor, with his usual drawing-room drawl and his blandest smile: "always to be found—eh? Well, what news in the City?" he inquired, sinking lackadaisically down upon a seat and caressing his brown moustache.

"No particular news, Colonel Malpas," replied the bill-broker: "unless it be that I have just had the Earl of Curzon with me."

"Ah! indeed," said the Colonel, by no means discomfitted at this announcement. "And what did he want?"

"Money—money, to be sure," answered the bill-broker, contemplating his visitor with searching, penetrating eyes, as if to read into the depths of his very soul. "No one ever comes to this office except for money—although *some* have different ways of obtaining it to what others have."

"No doubt, my dear fellow," observed Malpas, caressing his moustache with infinite composure. "Different kinds of security—eh? That's what you mean, I suppose?"

"But some securities are valid, Colonel Malpas," rejoined Emmerson, a malignant smile appearing faintly upon his lip,—"while others are mere waste paper—or worse—being downright forgeries."

"Well, I suppose you must run these kinds of risks now and then," remarked Malpas, still unmoved—and indeed not noticing the intentness with which the money-lender was surveying him. "But what do you do in such cases—forgeries, for instance?"

"If the man is a poor devil from whom I can never hope to get a farthing," replied Emmerson, "I send him to Newgate and make an example of him, for the benefit of society. But if he is a man not without resources, I give him four-and-twenty hours to take up the bills and save his honour."

"A very good plan too," observed Malpas, quite carelessly.

"I am glad you approve of it, sir," exclaimed Emmerson, in a severe tone: "because it is the very course I am about to adopt towards yourself."

"Towards me! What the devil do you mean?" demanded Colonel Malpas, with apparently so

natural an air of mingled indignation and surprise, that if it were assumed no dissimulation was ever more perfect.

"Yes, sir—towards you!" echoed the money-lender. "You have had three thousand guineas of my good money——"

"True! And a thousand guineas' worth of very wretched wine," interrupted Malpas, with a sneer: "nothing to be compared to the samples upon the mantel-piece, which I tasted. But for the money and the wine, amounting only to four thousand guineas, you hold bills for the extent of five thousand."

"Which bills, sir," remarked Emmerson, astonished at what he considered to be the Colonel's bare-faced assurance, "purport to be the acceptances of the Earl of Curzon—whereas they are all forgeries!"

"Forgeries! You lie, Mr. Emmerson!" exclaimed the Colonel, becoming very red—and then as suddenly turning pale as death;—but it might have been with anger and excitement, just as well as with conscious guilt. "Or if the Earl of Curzon says they are forgeries, *he* lies!"

"Your effrontery is intolerable, sir!" remarked Emmerson. "Will you tell me that *these* acceptances are in the same writing as *this?*" he demanded, taking the bills from his cash-box with one hand, and holding up the Earl's promissory note in the other.

"Certainly there is a difference—yes—a marked difference," stammered Malpas, now becoming deadly pale and remaining so. "I can't understand it—there is some unaccountable mistake ——Good God! what can it mean? But did you tell Curzon——"

"I told him nothing, sir," replied Emmerson. "He of his own accord stated to me that you had some time ago asked him to join you in raising money, but that he refused."

"Perfectly correct," exclaimed Malpas. "But nevertheless——"

And he stopped short, in a bewilderment that was evidently very far from feigned.

"Is it possible, Colonel, that you have been made a dupe by some party?" inquired Emmerson, now suspecting that the hint which he thus threw out might after all be the correct solution of the mystery. "Because, in that case," he continued, "the best thing to do will be at once to take the whole business before the Lord Mayor——"

"Not for worlds!" cried Malpas, becoming still more agitated: and he trembled from head to foot as if suddenly stricken with the palsy.

"Then what *do* you mean me to understand?—and what course am I to pursue?" demanded Emmerson, all his suspicions returning in the Colonel's disfavour.

"I know not how to answer you—I am bewildered—amazed—astounded——"

"But are the bills forgeries—or are they not?" inquired Emmerson.

"I can hardly bring myself to believe that they are," replied the Colonel; "and yet circumstances tend to prove that they must be."

"Then let us go to the Lord Mayor—unless you can pay me the amount, or give me both satisfactory explanations and securities."

"The Lord Mayor! No—no—ten thousand times no!" yelled forth the wretched Malpas: then, suddenly over-mastering the violence of his emotions, he said, "Mr. Emmerson, I can give you no explanations at present—I must see a certain person in the first instance——"

"And perhaps leave the country," added the bill-broker, abruptly. "No, sir—I am not to be treated in this way. I have a large sum of money at stake—and you cannot leave this office until we arrive at some satisfactory understanding. In plain terms, Colonel Malpas, you have played your part admirably—I believed you for a few moments, really fancying that you might have been made a dupe—but I shall be trifled with no longer. Either give me security—or I shall summon a constable."

"Good heavens! you cannot mean what you threaten, Emmerson!" cried the Colonel, in dismay. "You know not the ruin you will cause—the tremendous exposure which will be the result! I shudder at the bare idea——"

"And every guilty man shudders, Colonel Malpas, when entangled in the meshes of those admirable laws which support the frame-work of our beautiful system of society. Now, sir—do you wish to become better acquainted with these laws? or will you give me satisfaction—ample satifaction relative to those forged bills?"

"Emmerson," said the Colonel, greatly distressed and fearfully agitated, "grant me the twenty-four hours' license which you ere now assured me you are wont to accord under such circumstances——"

"Not an hour—not a minute, sir," exclaimed Emmerson, sternly. "This is a peculiar occurrence—it is not an ordinary one—and there is no possible guarantee against your quitting the country. I must give you into custody—and then perhaps your friends will come forward to assist in hushing up the matter."

Thus speaking, the bill-broker laid his hand upon the silver bell.

"Stop—one moment!" gasped the Colonel, now reduced to a wretched plight. "If I trust you with a great secret—a very great secret, Emmerson—the secret, in fact, of these bills—will you swear to guard it most religiously—most sacredly?"

"I will," was the response. "All I need is a satisfactory explanation——"

"And I can give it—I can give it!" exclaimed the Colonel, his form quivering with nervous excitement. "I will prove to you, through the lips of *another*, that I am innocent—guiltless——"

"And will that *other* pay the amount if you cannot?" asked Emmerson.

"Most assuredly. The secret will be in your keeping—and I tell you beforehand that it is a strange and an interesting one."

"I am to understand, then," said the money-broker, "that if you do not take up the bills in due course, I am to make use of this promised secret in order to enforce payment from some other party?"

"Precisely so," answered the Colonel: "but if do pay you out of my own resources, you are to keep the secret inviolable, as if it were one entrusted to you by a visitor from the tomb!"

"I agree. But when is this explanation to take place?—and how will it be managed?"

"If you will meet me to-morrow evening at eight o'clock," observed Malpas, after some few moments' reflection, "I will conduct you to a place where, by

concealing yourself, you can overhear everything that passes between me and that *other* person to whom I have alluded."

"And where shall I meet you?"

"Will you call for me at my own house in Great Marlborough Street?"

"At a quarter before eight I will be there," answered Emmerson.

"I shall expect you," rejoined Malpas: and he then took his leave, in a condition of mind far more painful than the reader can well imagine.

CHAPTER L.

THE MARRIAGE.

In George Street, leading into Hanover Square, stands St. George's church, which is the most fashionable temple of Hymen within the precincts of the metropolis. It is aristocratic in appearance as well as by repute,—not even the sanctity of religion and the meekness of the Christian faith having been able to rescue it from the intrusive pomp, ostentation, and vain parade of the frivolous, heartless, and empty-headed upper classes. The panels in front of the galleries are emblazoned with the names of the "noble lords," "right honourables," and "honourables," who have from time to time filled the office of churchwardens: the decorations of the pews show that they are intended for the ease and comfort of the "higher orders;" and the general aspect of the interior is "eminently fashionable."

An arched recess, with a painted window, enshrines the altar, which is set in a sculptured frame-work. The window is essentially of the Romish sacred architecture; and this effect is heightened into an appearance of positive Catholicism, not only by the representation of the Virgin and Child, the Dove, and the Crucifixion, in the stained glass, but also by the magnificent picture of the Last Supper behind the communion table.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning of Wednesday, September 25th, 1814, that a tall, slender, handsome young gentleman, dressed in deep mourning, slowly ascended the steps of the portico and entered St. George's Church, the doors of which were already opened. His countenance was pale and full of a deep melancholy: there was something peculiarly touching and profoundly interesting in its expression;—and amiability, goodness, and generosity were at the same time blended in every trait.

On entering the church, the young gentleman proceeded straight to the vestry, where the clerk was seated at a table poring over one of the huge parish registers.

"Good morning, Mr. Malvern—or Sir Valentine Malvern, as I suppose I ought to call you," said the clerk, rising from his seat and making a low bow.

"It is true that my friends wish me to assume the family honours, as they have already persuaded me to take the management of the estate," observed the young gentleman, with a profound sigh: "but I cannot endure the thought of adopting a course which after all might prove an usurpation."

"I wish that I could give you any hope, sir, of your lamented father's restoration," said the clerk. "I had known him for many years—ever since he first came to live in Hanover Square—and I have therefore known you also, Sir Valentine, from your childhood——"

"Do not address me as if I were already in possession of the title, my good friend," interrupted Malvern. "I have vowed to suffer a year to pass before I will consider my father as really dead—although, to speak candidly, Mr. Jackson, I feel that I am hoping against hope's extinction, and therefore in very desperation!"

"Alas! yes, Mr. Malvern—since it is thus that you choose to be still called," observed the clerk: "so mysterious a disappearance—happening all on a sudden, and without leaving a trace behind—cannot be accounted for otherwise than by the supposition that accident or foul play must have overtaken the unfortunate gentleman. If it was an accident, sir, some clue would have been discovered: and therefore——"

"Proceed not, Jackson—'tis too dreadful to reflect upon!" interrupted Malvern: then, as if to divert his thoughts from the melancholy topic, he said, "Have you found the entry in the register of births?"

"I have, sir," replied Jackson. "You were born on the 3rd of July, 1792—and therefore you are a little past twenty-two years old. I suppose your trustees require official proof of your having attained your majority?"

"Precisely so," answered Valentine. "It is a mere matter of form, inasmuch as they are relatives of mine and know full well my exact age. But still it is necessary to have everything regular; and therefore you must give me a certificate."

"To be sure, Mr. Malvern," returned the clerk: and he proceeded to fill up the usual form, which he handed to Valentine. "By the bye, sir," he observed, "we are going to have a wedding in a few minutes. I did not know last evening, when I met you in the Square and you told me that you required your baptismal certificate,—I did not know, I say, that I should have to visit the church for another purpose this morning. Not that marriages are rare at St. George's, heaven knows. Quite the contrary! But it was only late last evening that I received the intimation that there was one for this morning: and being a special license, I suppose it is rather a hurried affair," added the clerk, in a mysterious whisper: for he was evidently a man of garrulous propensities, although of kind disposition and inoffensive nature.

"Who are the happy pair?" asked Valentine, not choosing to offend the worthy man by cutting short the discourse abruptly, but in reality experiencing not the slightest interest in the question which he had just put.

"Mr. Horace Sackville and Miss Venetia Trelawney," replied the clerk. "Miss Trelawney, you know, is a celebrated beauty—indeed, the most lovely woman that ever was seen. So I am informed, at least: for I have never seen her, to my knowledge."

"Nor I either," observed Valentine: then, impelled by some undefinable feeling of curiosity, he said, "I shall remain and witness the ceremony."

"Ah! sir," remarked Jackson, shaking his head solemnly, "these fashionable marriages that take

place in this church, often set me a-thinking in a strange way. I have seen young and beautiful creatures almost dragged as it were to the altar, to bestow their hands upon drivelling dotards old enough to be their grandfathers; and I have afterwards watched their career in the world with great interest and anxiety. The wives in these cases always turned out wrong sooner or later: in nine cases out of ten there have been elopements, crim. cons., divorces, and other disgraceful scenes. Then, again, I have beheld young bridegrooms leading withered old women to that altar—spendthrifts, who having run through their own fortunes, obtain by marriage an opportunity of running through the fortunes of others. Yes, sir—I have seen many, many marriages in this church—but few, very few indeed that were for real love and have led to happiness. To tell you the truth, Mr. Malvern, I don't think the upper classes, generally speaking, have got any hearts at all—and if they have, they're seldom or never in the right place."

"Most assuredly, the English Aristocracy is not distinguished for morality, generosity, or intelligence," observed Valentine.

At this moment the clergyman entered the vestry; and Valentine being well acquainted with him, they conversed together for a few minutes. But as the time for the ceremony was now at hand, Malvern retired into the church where he entered a pew near the altar.

At that moment there were no other spectators present: but scarcely had Valentine taken his seat, when the Earl of Curzon made his appearance in the church and walked slowly up the aisle. He was pale and evidently much annoyed, although he endeavoured to conceal his vexation. Observing Valentine, with whom he was well acquainted, he entered the same pew and sate down by his side. While they were conversing in a subdued tone, Sir Douglas Huntingdon arrived—and also walking up the aisle, he noticed the Earl and Malvern, whom he immediately joined. His looks were perfectly good-humoured: and by the very first remark he made, he showed that he had not come thither by accident, nor was a stranger to the ceremony about to take place.

"Are you interested at all, Malvern, in Miss Trelawney's marriage?" he inquired, with a smile.

"How can I be?" asked the young gentleman. "I do not know her—nor do I believe that I have ever seen her. I came to the church on some business with the clerk; and hearing of what was about to take place, I remained to witness the ceremony."

"How did you know of it?" inquired the Earl of Curzon, in a whisper to Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"Oh! from some secret information," answered the baronet. "How did you?"

"Also from some secret source," was the Earl's response. "You do not appear to care about it at all."

"What is the use?" said Huntingdon. "Sackville is a lucky dog—that is all I can say. I shall offer him and Venetia my congratulations. But you seem to be particularly chagrined."

"I did not think it possible that the matter could have ended thus," replied Curzon, petulantly. "But here they come!"

The doors at the entrance were thrown open as the Earl was speaking; and the whispered colloquy, which Valentine Malvern did not overhear, was thus cut short.

The bridal-party entered the church. It consisted of Venetia Trelawney, Horace Sackville, Mrs. Arbuthnot, her daughter Penelope, Miss Bathurst, Dr. Copperas, and two or three other ladies and gentlemen — all the arrangements having been made under the supervision of Miss Bathurst, who, be it remembered, was Horace Sackville's aunt.

As the reader may suppose, Venetia looked transcendently beautiful in her virgin raiment. Her countenance was pale: her looks were downcast—and the long fringes that veiled her deep blue eyes, rested upon her cheeks. A gentle melancholy and soft bashfulness blended in the expression of her features: but she seemed far lovelier at this moment of timidity and embarrassment, than when radiant with the smiles of triumph or dignified in the presence of insult. Above her forehead, within the elegant white bonnet, lay her rich auburn hair, of velvet smoothness, and having the appearance of dark gold as the prismatic light from the painted window fell upon it. The virgin drapery displayed all the grand contours and flowing outlines of her shape—that form in which voluptuous fulness was so admirably blended with symmetrical proportion. Nor was the dress itself whiter than the bosom of which it allowed transient glimpses, and the swelling volume of which gave such richness to her figure in a profile view and rendered the waist more delicate than even it really was.

Horace Sackville experienced a joy which beamed in his looks; and a disinterested beholder would have thought that so handsome and elegant a young man was indeed well fitted to lead so charming a bride to the altar. Miss Bathurst and Penelope, who officiated as bridemaids, were both beautifully dressed—as was also Mrs. Arbuthnot: and Dr. Copperas, proud of the honour of being selected to give the bride away, whispered to Miss Bathurst that his only regret was that "so eminent a man and shrewd an observer of human nature as Dr. Thurston was not present to enrich his phrenological knowledge by contemplating the countenances of the happy couple."

On passing towards the altar, Sackville noticed Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the Earl of Curzon, to whom he bowed—and he could not prevent a gleam of triumph from appearing for a moment upon his countenance. The baronet returned his salutation with friendly familiarity—the Earl with cold hauteur. Venetia looked neither to the right nor to the left, and did not therefore observe them.

Not only, however, was she noticed by her two unsuccessful suitors, but also by Valentine Malvern, who started on catching the first glimpse of her countenance—for it instantaneously struck him that he had seen her before. The where, the when, and the circumstances, also flashed to his mind in a moment: and he contemplated her with a more earnest attention as she passed up the central avenue of the church. There was a mingled expression of astonishment and doubt in his features, as he thus followed her with his eyes: and when she reached the altar and her countenance was no longer visible, her back being now turned towards

him, he said in a low whisper to the Earl of Curzon, "Is that Miss Trelawney?"

"It is," replied the nobleman.

"Then I must be mistaken," thought Valentine to himself: but resuming his seat in the pew and bending his head forward, he gave way to the reflections that were now uppermost in his mind.

The clergyman and clerk had in the meantime taken their places at the communion table; and the marriage ceremony commenced. Scarcely had it begun when two more individuals entered the church—one taking his place somewhat noisily in a pew, and the other planting himself in the remotest angle of the sacred edifice. The former was Captain Tash, whose nose seemed to indicate that his morning draught at the *Green Dragon* had been none of the weakest: the latter was his man Robin, who appeared quite astonished at finding himself inside a church—especially the most fashionable one of the West End.

The ceremony was completed—and Venetia became the wife of Horace Sackville. The happy pair received the congratulations of those who belonged to the bridal party; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, advancing with a frank affability, requested permission to offer his congratulations likewise. As for the Earl of Curzon—he remained in the pew for a few moments longer: then suddenly prompted by some thought, he followed the baronet towards the altar.

Venetia had received the congratulations of Sir Douglas Huntingdon in the same spirit in which they were evidently offered: but the moment her eyes met the looks of the Earl of Curzon, a flush of displeasure appeared upon her countenance.

"I congratulate you, Mrs. Sackville, upon this happy occasion," he said, in a low tone and with accents that were full of a malignant irony: then, turning abruptly away, as Venetia drew herself up haughtily, he took Horace aside for an instant—muttering in his ear, "I congratulate *you* also upon your marriage with one who has abandoned herself both to Leveson and the Prince—and on the same evening too!"

He then turned away and walked out of the church, followed by Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Sackville, who was staggered for a moment, almost instantaneously recovered himself; and giving his arm to his lovely bride, he led her towards the vestry, where the register was to be signed. This ceremony being completed, the party quitted the church.

Two carriages were waiting at the door to convey the company to Miss Bathurst's residence in Stratton Street, where an elegant repast was prepared. Lady Wenlock, the Honourable George Macnamara, and Lieutenant Apsley of the Guards, who had been invited, were already there; and the usual healths were drunk. Dr. Copperas, in making a speech, observed that "it was assuredly the happiest morning he had ever passed in all his life, with the one exception of the memorable and never-to-be-forgotten day on which he first had the honour of being introduced to that extraordinary man—the ornament of his profession—Dr. Thurston."

The breakfast was over—a footman announced that the carriage was in readiness—and Sackville handed his bride into the vehicle. The serious-looking old livery-servant and Jessica were seated in the rumble behind: the trunks were packed upon the roof—and, all being in readiness, the postilion drove away at a rapid rate.

The happy couple were bound for Brighton, where they intended to pass a few days. They spoke but little until the travelling-carriage was beyond the southern outskirts of London: but they sate with their hands united in each other's clasp, and exchanging fond looks. For Horace adored and worshipped the charming creature who had become his bride: and Venetia was not indifferent to the fervid attachment, the personal appearance, and the elegant manners of him who was now her husband.

"Did not Curzon whisper something annoying in your ears, Horace?" inquired Venetia at length, a slight flush appearing upon her countenance. "Tell me what he said," she urged, seeing that Sackville hesitated to reply.

"He said that he was aware of your visit to Lord Leveson and also to the Prince on the same evening," answered Horace.

"And so were you," replied Venetia, laughing. "But you were also acquainted with the particulars of these interviews and the results of each."

"I was nevertheless startled at the moment, my angel," said Horace: "because I could not possibly conceive how the Earl came to learn that you had paid those visits."

"He employed spies to follow me," said Venetia, her musical laugh sounding deliciously upon her husband's ears, although he felt deeply indignant at the announcement which excited her gaiety. "I discovered it all yesterday: his spies were even in the church ere now. But let us converse on other matters for the present: and I will tell you all about the spies on some future occasion."

"Be it so, dearest," said Horace, as he gazed with inexpressible devotion on the lovely creature who was now his own.

Meantime, Valentine Malvern had returned to his own house at No. 20, Hanover Square, his mind filled with the image of Venetia: and he even reproached himself frequently during the remainder of the day, for allowing the incidents of the morning to divert his thoughts at all from the painful topic on which they were hitherto wont to be settled—namely, the unaccounted-for disappearance of his father, Sir Archibald.

With regard to the happy couple, we might record all the tender and interesting things which they said to each other during the ride to Brighton,—we might say how they reached that fashionable watering-place at a late hour in the evening,—how they took up their quarters at the principal hotel,—and how they both longed, with a secret rapture which they mutually concealed, for the arrival of the moment that was to crown their wedded bliss. But we must not dwell upon those details, nor prolong unnecessarily this portion of our narrative. If, however, we may penetrate for a single instant into the nuptial chamber, where Jessica hastily divested her mistress of her apparel, we might observe that never, never had Venetia appeared more transcendently lovely than when, with blushing cheeks and heaving bosom, she heard her faithful attendant expatiate upon the handsome appearance of the bridegroom. We might add

that in the meantime Horace himself was waiting with all possible anxiety in an adjacent dressing-room;—and we might close our observations by stating that when at length Jessica had withdrawn, and the happy pair were clasped in each other's arms, they both forgot any disagreeable circumstances which pertained to their union, and abandoned themselves to those delights which Milton did not deem unworthy to be apostrophised and honoured in his immortal verse!

CHAPTER LI.

AN ARISTOCRATIC PAIR.

It was about noon—on the day of the marriage just described; and a beautiful lady was lounging negligently upon a sofa in a handsomely-furnished apartment at a mansion in Grosvenor Street.

She was about six-and-twenty years of age—of middle height—and of dark but clear complexion. There was a peculiar beauty in the full lips of bright scarlet; and these, together with her flashing eyes and decisively pencilled brows, indicated the warmth of her temperament.

Her countenance was of an oriental style of loveliness, irradiated as it were with a dark yet glowing lustre. Her hair was not precisely of sable blackness, but had that purple and glossy hue which made it shining, soft, and smooth as velvet: its luxuriance was remarkable—and, the lady's toilette not having as yet been achieved, the heavy tresses hung in massive clusters upon the firm, plump, and polished shoulders. Her profile was softly acquiline, without anything approaching to prominency of feature, save in respect to the lips, which were luscious and full, but not coarse. The teeth which they revealed, when parting in smiles that breathed a tender sensuousness, were of pearly whiteness;—and her looks were brilliant and animated, with a provocative expression of subdued wantonness.

Her bust was purely sculptural—the chest being somewhat narrow, and the bosoms by no means exuberant, but of sufficient developement to mark the statue-like contours of her shape. They were well detached, rising in perfect hemispheres, and sustaining the beauty of their proportions by their own firmness; for at the moment we are describing this lady, she wore neither corset nor artificial means of compressure. An elegant morning-wrapper was drawn loosely around her form, and confined at the waist by a broad ribbon negligently tied.

Her arms were not stout, but most symmetrically modelled; and nothing could exceed the beauty of her hand, with the pellucid nails seeming like supporting arches to the taper fingers, and of a rosy tint. Her feet were long and narrow; the ankles were not too slight, but perfectly rounded, and swelling gradually upward into a fine development of limb. Passion was in her looks—but a voluptuous and dreamy langour was in her attitude as she reclined upon the sofa.

The oriental duskiness of her complexion—appearing like the softest and most delicate tinge of bronze—made her seem a warm and glowing creature, with the hottest blood running in her veins and ready to mantle in crimson flush upon the countenance at the slightest emotion. Then how eloquent would become her features with those ardent and passionate blushes—but eloquent only of consuming sensuousness or some other feeling equally intense. She did not seem a woman who could love fondly, but furiously — not a being susceptible of any lasting impression, but full of erratic longings and desires. Nevertheless, as if profoundly conscious of her own nature and understanding all the weakness as well as all the strength of her soul, she assumed in society a look of calm bashfulness and modest reserve, which led even the most experienced observer to suppose that she was a woman whose fervid temperament was kept under becoming restraint by an innate virtue and sense of propriety that rose dominant above her passions.

Such was Editha, the Countess of Curzon.

Though the Aristocracy, generally speaking, are licentious and immoral to a degree, there are certain families belonging to that sphere who are more than the rest notorious for hereditary profligacy. Depravity would seem to run in their blood, and to be as traditionary as their titles and estates. The factitious honour of birth and the flagrant dishonour of conduct would appear to be a concurrent heritage in these cases. To such a family did Lady Curzon belong. She was one of six sisters: all were heiresses—all were married—and Editha was the only one of the six who had not proved faithful to the family character by being convicted in a court of justice of being unfaithful to her husband. The five sisters were all divorced, and had either married again or were living in a disreputable manner with paramours. Whether Editha was really faithful to the Earl of Curzon, will presently transpire: at all events, scandal had never breathed a sentence against her reputation. Her mother had been a notorious demirep—her aunts were all invested with the same unenviable notoriety: and Editha was the only female scion of her family who had reached the age of twenty-six without figuring in a trial for Crim. Con., or in a divorce case before the House of Lords.

She was lounging, as already stated, upon the sofa, when the door opened and her husband entered the room. After having witnessed the marriage of Venetia and Horace at St. George's Church, he had taken a walk in the park to endeavour to dissipate his ill-humour and vexation: but this condition of feeling was only aggravated, instead of becoming appeased, the more he gave way to thought. He accordingly returned home at about noon; and, although he was not accustomed to vouchsafe much of his company to his wife, the phantasy nevertheless took hold of him to seek her presence on this occasion.

"Well, Editha—all alone—and not dressed yet?" he exclaimed, flinging himself into a chair at some distance from where she was reclining on the sofa.

"It is too early for visitors, and I do not feel inclined to go out in the carriage to-day," she answered, in a manner not precisely cold, but indifferent.

"By the bye, you asked me for some money yesterday," observed the nobleman; "and I promised to give you some to-day. Here are a couple of hundred guineas. I borrowed two thousand of Emmerson, a bill-broker in the City."

"Ah! I have heard the name before," said Editha. "But what do you suppose I can do with two hundred guineas towards paying all that is owing?"

"You must do what you can, my dear," replied the Earl, with perfect unconcern. "I wanted the remainder for my own special purposes."

At this moment a servant entered the room bearing a letter on a silver tray, and which he handed to the Countess. She took it languidly, supposing that it was a note of invitation or frivolous correspondence from some female friend: but the instant she caught a glimpse of the handwriting, she started slightly—in a scarcely perceptible manner—while a gentle flush appeared upon her countenance. The Earl, who was observing her at the instant, noticed that little movement and this transient glow: and, he said, "Who is your correspondent?"

"No one of any importance," replied Editha: and having hastily scanned the contents of the note, she thrust it into her bosom.

The Earl was neither astonished by the evasive answer which she gave him, nor by the manner in which she thus disposed of the letter—for they had long ceased to be on terms of mutual confidence and were not accustomed to communicate, much less peruse, each other's correspondence. But he had noticed the start and the flush—and a suspicion, faint as the first glimmer of dawn in the oriental sky, gleamed in his brain.

This was the first time he had ever entertained an idea derogatory to the honour of his wife. On the contrary, he had hitherto believed her strictly faithful to her marriage-vows. But now—he scarcely knew why—a certain uneasiness crept slowly upon him. That start, almost imperceptible as it was—and that blush, faint and transient though it were—had engendered a vague and undefined misgiving in his breast. The next moment he found himself reflecting upon the fact that Editha belonged to a family notorious for its profligacy; and he knew full well that her own passions were of the strongest, most fervid and insatiable description.

All these thoughts traversed his brain in a few moments:—but dissembling the incipient uneasiness which he experienced, and suddenly determining not to excite in her mind the suspicion that he even entertained such a misgiving, he began to converse upon a variety of ordinary topics. On the other hand, Editha fancied that her temporary emotion on receiving the letter had escaped his observation; and she discoursed with more gaiety and friendliness than she had for a long time manifested towards her husband.

He would have given worlds to obtain a peep—just one peep—at that letter: but the thing was impracticable. At one moment he was half inclined to seat himself by her side and begin to toy and dally with her: but such a course, by being most unusual on his part, would at once have excited her suspicions as to his real object. He therefore abandoned the idea, and resolved to watch her movements.

Luncheon was presently served up: and afterwards Lady Curzon retired to her chamber to dress. The Earl went out to visit some friends; but they all noticed that he looked gloomy and absent. At six he returned home to dinner; and as there was no company that day, he and his wife were alone together. He drank more freely than usual, and forced himself into a gaiety which was after all so well assumed that it entirely deceived the Countess.

"What are you going to do with yourself this evening?" he inquired, when the dessert was placed upon the table and the domestics had withdrawn.

"I was thinking of passing an hour or two with Lady Lechmere," was the quiet response.

"But I thought you did not purpose to go out today?" said Curzon, regarding her furtively but with earnest attention.

"I meant that I was in no humour to take my usual airing in the carriage," observed Editha, glancing towards the time-piece on the mantel.

"May I accompany you to Lady Lechmere's?" asked the Earl, as he helped himself to claret.

"What an idea!" ejaculated the Countess, looking hard at her husband: then, feeling convinced that he suspected nothing, so well did he dissimulate, she observed, laughing, "The world will fancy you have become quite uxorious all on a sudden. Besides, Lady Lechmere did not include you in the invitation she sent me this morning—for that note which I received when you were with me, was from her."

"Well, I do not press it," said the Earl, apparently quite satisfied. "Only I thought that as we have been a little more friendly to-day than for some time past, it would be as well if such feeling were to continue."

"And who first destroyed that feeling?" asked Editha, with a slight accent of sarcasm in her voice.

"I must confess that I have not proved a model of a husband," said the Earl: "but then there are allowances to be made. Remember the artificial state of society in which we live, move, and breathe, —think of the temptatations by which a man of my rank and position is inevitably surrounded——"

"Oh! I have not time to discuss the point with you now," exclaimed Editha, starting from her seat and laughing in a lively manner. "It is seven o'clock, and I must hurry away. But I shall cheerfully promote the friendly feeling which you say has arisen between us once more. So now adieu—I am off to North Audley Street,"—where, we should observe, Lady Lechmere resided.

"And I shall go and pass the evening with Leveson," said the Earl: "or else with Huntingdon, if the Marquis should not be at home."

The husband and wife both quitted the dining-room together. The former took down his hat from a peg in the hall, and sallied forth at once: and Editha, having seen him thus take his departure, ascended to her own chamber.

But the Earl of Curzon, instead of repairing to the Marquis of Leveson's, hastened to the nearest hackney-coach stand—entered a vehicle—and returned in it to the immediate vicinage of his own mansion. He ordered it to stop nearly opposite, as if waiting to receive a fare from the house at which it thus drew up: and remaining inside, he kept watch upon the door of his own dwelling. His wife's carriage was already there: and in a few minutes he saw the front door open. Then a female figure, enveloped in a handsome cloak, and with a thick veil over her face, descended the stone steps and entered the carriage, which immediately drove away.

Thrusting his head from the window of the hackney-coach, the Earl directed the driver to follow the carriage at an easy distance: but when,

in the course of a few minutes, he found that the equipage which he was pursuing, turned into North Audley Street, he said to himself, "Well, after all she is really going to Lady Lechmere's. Perhaps I have done her an injustice:"—and yet the dark suspicion still remained in the profundity of his soul.

The carriage stopped at Lady Lechmere's—the hackney-coach halted a few doors off—and the Earl again watched eagerly from the window. "Yes—she enters the house—and the carriage drives away," he muttered to himself. "I will now go and join the party at Lady Lechmere's—invent some excuse for following Editha after what she said upon the proposal I made to accompany her—and endeavour to ascertain whether she expected to meet some particular individual there."

The Earl was about to order the hackney-coach to drive up to Lady Lechmere's door, when the thought struck him that the course he was about to adopt could not possibly fail to be seen through by Editha. If she were really guilty, it would only serve to put her the more completely on her guard: and if she were innocent, he would be rendering himself supremely ridiculous in her eyes. No—he must continue to veil his suspicions, and watch her movements until he should either obtain substantial proof of her infidelity or else acquire the certainty that his fears were totally unfounded. Having thus resolved, he ordered the hackney-coach to take him back to Grosvenor Street; and alighting at a short distance from his dwelling, he dismissed the vehicle.

Consulting his watch by the aid of a door-lamp, he saw that it wanted twenty minutes to eight; and not knowing what to do with himself for the rest of the evening, he resolved to proceed to Lord Leveson's in Albemarle Street. But a sudden idea struck him. The fact was that his wife's principal lady's-maid, Gertrude by name, was a very beautiful young woman, with a voluptuous figure, a wanton countenance, fine teeth, and a pair of the most wicked eyes that ever sent forth flashing looks from pupils of the darkest jet. The Earl had more than once flung furtive glances of deep meaning upon the captivating Gertrude: but she invariably appeared to take no notice of his amorous oglings. This bashfulness on her part, he felt assured, was only an affectation of strict propriety; and, being a very handsome man, as well as imbued with all the characteristic conceit, arrogance, and vanity of the order to which he belonged, he flattered himself that he had only to become more explicit in his overtures to achieve an easy triumph in that quarter. The opportunity and the humour now alike served admirably: his wife was from home—he was restless and uneasy—he wanted something to amuse and divert his mind—and he resolved to enter upon the conquest of the beautiful Gertrude forthwith.

Thus, only a few minutes after watching the movements of his wife, and still smarting with the suspicion of her infidelity,—an infidelity which, if brought home to her, he was prepared to brand with all the ignominy of exposure, prosecution, and divorce,—this unprincipled aristocrat retraced his way homeward with the deliberate intention of seducing that self-same wife's confidential attendant. But is this flagrant case an isolated one?—or is it a mere type of man's too frequent conduct? Alas! yes: the husband may sin with comparative impunity—but if the wife, no matter how neglected and ill-used at home, yields to temptation, there is naught but the highest chastisement and most signal penalty for her! Truly, woman has her wrongs which should engage the thoughts and enlist the sympathies of the philanthropist and moralist in this age when all the world is crying out for political and social reform!

The Earl of Curzon retraced his way homeward: but just as he arrived in front of his house, he beheld a female dressed in the well known apparel of Gertrude herself, ascending the area steps. Yes—it was *her* cloak, which he had often observed as becoming her so well—*her* bonnet, which he had frequently noticed as being worn so coquettishly! But a thick black veil was drawn over her countenance—a modest precaution which all respectable and well-behaved young women of her class were wont to adopt in those times when the streets were comparatively unprotected with the wretched guardianship of old watchmen, and when roystering blades and impudent gallants were accustomed to insult every woman whose unveiled features happened to please their phantasy.

"Gertrude, my dear girl," said Curzon, assuming his blandest tones, "where are you going?"

But, instead of stopping as the Earl had hoped and expected, she brushed past him with evident indignation and hurried along the street. He was however almost immediately at her side again: and, in a voice of gentle remonstrance, he said, "Why are you so cruel? You know that I love you, Gertrude—yes, ten thousand times better than I love your mistress: my looks must have told you so. Come, will you not speak to me?—not a single word? Throw up that veil—and let me see whether you are really and positively angry. I would wager anything that you are smiling with a delightful wickedness behind that thick screen. Gertrude, do you hear me? Surely you do not require so much coaxing?"

But, instead of making any response to this softly insidious language, she endeavoured to outstrip him: then, finding that he persevered in accompanying her, and evidently alarmed or else profoundly indignant at his importunities, she shrank against the wall as if about to faint.

"Good heavens, Gertrude!" exclaimed the nobleman, looking uneasily up and down the street, with the fear that they might be observed and that it would be supposed he was ill-using the female: "you cannot mean that you are really angry with me? Give me your hand—take my arm—and we will converse quietly and tranquilly as we walk along."

Thus speaking, he endeavoured to take her hand: but she withdrew it violently, a faint scream bursting from her lips at the same moment. The Earl was astounded: he had not anticipated such opposition to his overtures. Suddenly the front door of a house opposite opened—and several gentlemen appeared on the threshold.

"For God's sake, come away with me, Gertrude!" said the Earl, impatiently.

But she made a movement as if about to fly towards the gentlemen at the door opposite: and the Earl, dreading the scandal of an exposure, beat a rapid retreat towards his own mansion, while the

THE COUNTESS OF CURZON.

object of his importunity hurried away in the contrary direction.

Baffled, enraged, disappointed, and humiliated, the Earl of Curzon re-entered his dwelling: and after drinking a tumbler of claret to cool the throat which was parched with the fever of overwrought excitement, he flung himself upon a sofa and gave way to his unpleasurable reflections. Everything seemed to be going wrong with him—all circumstances were combining for his annoyance. His pecuniary affairs were in no agreeable position—he had failed to possess himself of Venetia, whose charms had well nigh maddened him—the suspicion which he entertained relative to his wife, was still strong enough to goad and torture him cruelly—and now the rebuff he had experienced from Gertrude crowned his humiliation and annoyance. He was just in that humour when a man would give anything to be able to vent his spite upon the head of some victim, either for a real or an imaginary offence.

Suddenly a thought struck him. His wife was from home—and Gertrude was also absent. The former would not, in all probability, return until eleven o'clock or perhaps midnight; and the latter had no doubt received permission to pass the evening with her friends. What if the Earl were to search in Editha's boudoir to see if he could discover the note which she had received in the morning, or any other letters that might afford a clue to her conduct?

Inspired with this idea, Curzon hastened upstairs—entered the boudoir—and, closing the door, began to search all the drawers. He however discovered nothing of any consequence. Editha's writing-desk stood upon a table: but it was locked. He took out his own bunch of keys and tried every one of them at all corresponding with the size of the lock. The last key was found to fit—and the desk was opened.

One of the compartments was filled with letters, which the Earl proceeded to examine with careful

attention. But they were chiefly invitations to parties—communications from the female friends of the Countess or from her sisters—or dunning applications from tradesmen. One note, however, somewhat puzzled the Earl. It was from Lady Lechmere—dated about three months back—and running as follows:—

"I have received your hasty note, my dear Editha, and send you back a reply by Gertrude. Yes—I will be at home all the evening, and will adopt the usual precautions. You have nothing to fear on that account. The servants shall receive orders *to admit no one but the Countess of Curzon.* But are you certain that you can trust the girl?

"Your affectionate friend,

"KATHERINE LECHMERE."

This letter, laconic though it were, was sufficient to strengthen the Earl's misgivings. There was evidently some secret understanding between his wife and Lady Lechmere. What usual precautions were to be adopted?—why was there nothing to fear?—and if the girl alluded to was Gertrude, wherefore should it be necessary to exercise caution in trusting her? Did Editha receive a lover's visits at Lady Lechmere's? If so, what meant the orders to the servants to admit no one but Editha herself? Lady Lechmere was a widow, and had neither brother, uncle, son, or male cousin, residing with her beneath the same roof. Editha's lover, if she had one, was not therefore an inhabitant of the house: and how could she go thither to meet him, since none but herself was to be admitted?

There was a deep mystery in all this: and the more profound the mystery, the stronger becomes the suspicion. So it was in the present case;—and while completely perplexed by the ambiguous contents of the note, the Earl of Curzon nevertheless regarded it as an item of evidence against the Countess. At all events it was certain that whatsoever the secret might be, Gertrude was in the confidence of her mistress: but had he not mortally offended the lady's-maid by his conduct that evening?—and could he hope to propitiate her in such a way as to lead her to divulge anything she knew?

Reserving this matter for after consideration, the Earl continued his search amongst his wife's papers. To his further surprise he presently discovered a bill of exchange, accepted by himself. It was an old bill, which had been duly honoured by him on arriving at maturity: but it ought to be upon a file in his library, instead of in his wife's desk. It might however have come there by accident: and after all, the incident was trivial in itself and could have no connexion with the object of the search which he was instituting.

At the bottom of the desk he discovered a slip of paper, on which the name of *Curzon* was written several times. He examined the writing attentively, and soon saw that it was not in his own hand, as he had at the first glance imagined it to be. But the writing was evidently in imitation of his own; and a more minute inspection convinced him that it was Editha's. Had she, then, been practising his signature? It appeared so: but for what earthly purpose? The bill of exchange caught his eye: and it instantaneously struck him that she had surreptitiously possessed herself of it in order to copy his signature. Yes—this was now apparent enough: but again recurred the question—For what purpose had she done this?

There were no more papers to examine; and the Earl returned all the letters and documents to the compartment of the desk whence he had taken them. The other compartment only contained writing-paper and sealing-wax. He locked the desk again, and quitting the bourdoir unobservedly as he had entered it, retraced his way to the dining-room.

CHAPTER LII.

THE BILLS OF EXCHANGE.

At about a quarter past eight o'clock, Malpas and Mr. Emmerson entered Soho Square, and proceeded direct to the establishment of Mrs. Gale, who, previously informed by the Colonel of the intended visit, was prepared to receive them. In fact, the Colonel had been with her in the morning; and having found means to pay her the five hundred guineas owing to her, together with a handsome douceur by want of interest, he once more stood in her good books. For Mrs. Gale never cared what other people might think or say of a person, so long as she had reason to be satisfied with his conduct.

The Colonel had told her in the morning exactly what he wished to be done in the evening; and Mrs. Gale had made arrangements accordingly. She now therefore conducted Malpas and Emmerson up into a suite of rooms which we must describe.

First, there was a handsome parlour, from which a little cabinet opened at the side with a glass door. This glass door had green blinds within, so that no one could see into it from the parlour: whereas a person stationed in that cabinet could easily observe as he might also overhear, everything that took place in the parlour. Beyond the parlour itself there was a bed chamber, with a dressing-room adjoining.

Such was the suite to which Mrs. Gale conducted the Colonel and the bill-broker; and the moment she had retired, Emmerson ensconsed himself in the cabinet, taking the key with him and locking the door inside.

A few minutes afterwards Mrs. Gale re-appeared, introducing the Countess of Curzon, whom she ceremoniously assisted to lay aside her cloak and bonnet. The moment that the woman had retired, Editha threw herself into the arms of the Colonel and embraced him with the fervour of infatuated passion.

"I had some little difficulty in keeping this appointment which you gave me, my dear Percy," said the Countess, addressing the Colonel by his Christian name. "Would you believe that the Earl was seized with quite an uxorious fit to-day, and actually wanted to accompany me to Lady Lechmere's? But no matter——"

"You look somewhat flurried, dearest Editha," observed Malpas, contemplating her with attention. "Has anything occurred——"

"Nothing of any consequence. I will tell you presently," interrupted the lady, as she sate down by his side upon a sofa. "But you must first explain why you wished to see me so very particularly this evening as your note stated. You charged me to be sure and not disappoint you, Percy. And by the bye, when I think of it, the Earl was with me when your note came."

"But he suspects nothing?" said Malpas, anxiously.

"Nothing—absolutely nothing," replied the Countess, emphatically. "Indeed, how can he? All our precautions are so excellently taken. But pray explain the urgent matter——"

"You are well aware, dearest Editha," said Malpas, "that I am always longing to be with you—always unhappy unless in your society—and never happier than when clasping you in my arms. Therefore, it is not surprising that I should have been so urgent to meet you this evening—especially as some days have elapsed since last we met. But there was another inducement which prompted me to be so pressing with regard to an interview for this evening: in fact, I wished to have some serious conversation with you——"

"What about?" inquired Editha, quickly: and her large black eyes were fixed with a sort of uneasiness upon the countenance of her paramour.

"Those bills, my dearest love," answered Malpas.

"Ah!" ejaculated the Countess, becoming visibly troubled. "You surely do not require any more assistance in that shape?"

"Listen to me with patience for a few moments, Editha," said the Colonel. "You are aware that I obtained the money for those bills from a gentleman named Emmerson——"

"Yes—and my husband has likewise received money from that Mr. Emmerson," interrupted Editha. "He told me so this morning. But it was evident from his manner that he did not know you had been dealing with the same money-broker."

"He does *not* know it, Editha—and very fortunate is it for me," added Malpas, with a profound seriousness of manner, "that he is thus ignorant."

"Of course it is, Percy," exclaimed the Countess,—"very fortunate for us both. If he knew that I had given the bills to you, ne would as a matter of course instantaneously suspect tnat there is some very close intimacy between us. When you first communicated to me your extreme pecuniary embarrassments and stated that the Earl had refused you the service of his acceptance to a bill of exchange, I told you that I could procure his name to a promissory note for my own use——"

"And I promised you," observed the Colonel, "that I would place that note in the hands of a gentleman who would advance the money upon it and not breathe a syllable to a soul relative to the transaction. I kept my word——"

"No doubt," interrupted the Countess: "and you also undertook to provide the funds to redeem the security even before it should become due, so that the bill might not be presented to the Earl at all;—otherwise, if presented, he would of course see your name upon it."

"True, my dear Editha," said Malpas. "And you gave me several bills at short intervals, with the Earl's acceptance to them."

"But I cannot see the utility of this recapitulation of circumstances so well known to both of us," observed the Countess, with the glitter of uneasiness in her luminous eyes. "The whole matter is summed up in a few words. You were exceedingly pressed for money, and required a collateral security. All these things you explained to me, as I knew little or nothing about bills and promissory notes previously. I told you that I would undertake to wheedle the Earl out of his acceptance, alleging that I required it to satisfy some pressing liabilities due to my jewellers and dress-makers. Knowing that the Earl would not be in a condition to meet the bill, I was obliged to assure him that one of my sisters had promised me a large sum of money in a month or two, and that I would provide for the bill by the time it should come due. This was the pretext: but in reality I relied upon your obtaining the requisite funds—and I sincerely hope you will be enabled to do so. Tell me, Percy, is there any doubt upon that point?"

"My dear Editha, I shall obtain the funds some how or another," answered Malpas: "but that is not the immediate question. I am afraid that prompted by your affection for me, and in order to save me from arrest and degradation at the time——"

"What do you mean?" inquired the Countess, with all the petulance of intense uneasiness.

"I mean, dearest," answered the Colonel,—"that—but do not be offended——that your husband did not sign those bills——"

"And what makes you think so?" demanded Editha, actually gasping with the vain and ineffectual efforts which she made to conceal her terror.

"Because Emmerson suspects something of the kind," returned Malpas. "He has compared the Earl's signature with that upon the bills which I placed in his hands——"

"O God! I am lost," cried Editha, no longer able to keep down the effervescence of her harrowing emotions: and covering her face with her hands, she burst into tears.

"Compose yourself, for heaven's sake!" said the Colonel. "Nothing is yet known—Mr. Emmerson is a gentleman and possesses a kind heart—everything can be repaired and remedied! Only do, I conjure you, my Editha—do tell me all the truth."

"But is it yet time to prevent this storm from bursting over my head?" she exclaimed, removing her hands from her countenance and gazing up piteously in the face of her paramour.

"There *is* time, I can assure you, Editha,—plenty of time!" answered Malpas. "Do not give way to grief, which is now unavailing—but let us look the whole affair boldly in the face. Mr. Emmerson only requires to have the payment assured—and he will never breathe a word relative to the transaction. But pray tell me everything without reserve."

"I will," said the Countess, endeavouring to compose her looks and her feelings. "You communicated your embarrassments to me—and I was distracted at the thought of seeing you borne off to a debtors' prison. I therefore resolved to adopt a desperate course in order to save you. And yet it neither seemed to me so desperate nor dangerous after all; because, from what you told me, I understood clearly enough that if you provided the funds in time to take up the bills, the Earl need never know that his name had been made use of at all. And that you would so provide the funds in due season I felt confident. Well, I obtained from the Earl's file of papers an old bill which he had honoured some time since; and I imitated his signature, after some practice, to the best of my ability. You had previously told me that if I obtained his acceptance to the blank stamps, you would fill them up. Now, you must forgive me, my dear Percy," said the Countess, in a tone of impassioned entreaty,

—"for I did all this entirely through devotion to you."

"Forgive you, dearest Editha!" exclaimed Malpas, much of whose enthusiasm of tone and manner was affected: "how can I do otherwise than forgive you? You have risked much—I do not think you are precisely aware *how much*—for my sake: and it is fortunate that we are in such hands as Emmerson's. He is a perfect gentleman—possessed of great influence in the City—and will soon be an Alderman," added the Colonel, sententiously; for he was making these remarks in order to propitiate the bill-broker whose close vicinage was so little suspected by the Countess of Curzon.

"It is indeed fortunate that the bills are in such hands," said the Countess, now bitterly repenting the imprudence into which a passionate infatuation had betrayed her at the time. "But does he already know that you have received them from me?"

"I was compelled to confess the truth, Editha," replied Malpas: "or else he would have given me into custody on a charge of forgery."

"Ah! then you hesitated not to sacrifice *my* honour in order to save your own!" ejaculated the Countess, suddenly starting from the sofa, while the rich blood mantled in scarlet glow through the transparent duskiness of her skin.

"Pardon me, Editha," said Malpas, confused and humiliated: "but what could I do?"

"Risked Newgate—death—anything, sooner than betray the honour of a confiding woman!" exclaimed the Countess of Curzon, fixing upon her paramour a look of withering scorn and superb contempt. "Did I risk nothing for you when I forged my husband's name to save you from a debtors' gaol?—have I risked nothing in giving you that love which could alone prompt me to such a perilous act? It was in a moment of utter contempt and indifference for all consequences, that I became a forger: and that supreme recklessness was produced by my devotion to you! Now, sir, you have rewarded me by betraying my honour into the hands of an usurer——"

"For God's sake use no harsh words with respect to Emmerson!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Your honour is safe in his keeping—he will not betray you——"

"Wretch!" ejaculated the Countess, bitterly. "Much as I loved you a minute back, I now hate and detest you! Viper—would to heaven that I had the power of crushing you under my foot!"

"Editha, you are raving!" cried Malpas, his countenance ghastly pale and his lips livid and quivering. "Do you intend to quarrel with me for ever?"

"My pardon you can never obtain, sir!" answered the Countess haughtily. "If my heart were henceforth to feel one moment's tenderness towards you, I would stab it to the very core. But enough of this portion of the painful drama. One word more—and I take my departure. Am I to understand that you will arrange with Mr. Emmerson for these bills and that you will provide for them in due course?—or will you crown your infamy by suffering the transaction to reach my husband's ears?"

"I will provide for them—on my honour I will provide for them?" exclaimed the Colonel. "But hear me——"

"Enough, sir!" ejaculated the Countess with imperious tone and haughty manner.

She took up her bonnet and cloak: he advanced, tremblingly and pale, to assist her in putting on the latter; but she repulsed him with a gesture of scorn. He essayed to murmur a few syllables of abject entreaty—but she darted upon him a look that seemed fraught with the scathing powers of lightning.

A moment afterwards—and she was gone!

Throughout this scene the bill-broker had remained a hidden but profoundly interested observer in the cabinet with the glass door. It was the first time he had ever seen the Countess of Curzon: and he was astonished as well as enraptured at the peculiar style of her loveliness. Her beauty appeared to him of the Mauritanian species which characterised the Moorish women who once made Spain their home, and the memory of whose charms has been preserved in many a tradition, legend, and romance. On throwing off the cloak which enveloped her entire person, Editha had appeared in a dark velvet dress, which seemed most befitting her complexion: and the admirable fashion of the costume set off the sculptural symmetry of her shape to its utmost advantage. Then the power of her eyes, so luminous in their intense darkness, and so splendid with their long jetty lashes—the rich hue of the flush that so often mantled on her cheeks during the conversation with her now discarded paramour—the vivid red of those lips that were so delicious in their moist fulness and that seemed to breathe sweets even when the words that passed through them were sharp with scorn—the quick heavings of that bosom which the low-bodied dress left more than half exposed—the grace, the elegance, and the dignity of her attitudes, all adapting themselves to the style of the discourse she was hearing or giving utterance to at the time,—in a word, every charm and every attraction that invested or surrounded her, produced a powerful effect upon Emmerson.

She departed in anger, as we have already described: and then the bill-broker, unlocking the door, came forth from the place of his concealment.

"Now, Emmerson, are you satisfied?" said Malpas, still trembling beneath the influence of that withering, blighting, seathing look which Editha had last thrown upon him.

"She is the only woman I ever saw whose love is worth dying for," responded the bill-broker: then, gazing upon Malpas with somewhat of that scorn and contempt which he had caught as it were by transfusion from the noble lady who had just taken her departure, he said, "How feel you now, Colonel, after the closing scene in this drama, as the Countess so appropriately styled it?"

"Whatever has happened, Mr. Emmerson," replied Malpas, moodily, "'tis you who have driven me to it. But now that you have heard my innocence proclaimed from the lady's own lips—now also that you know every minute detail of the entire transaction—what course do you propose to adopt?"

"I am not decided at present," answered the bill-broker. "You may however rest assured that I shall not take any step which may compromise the Countess of Curzon. But you will come to my office to-morrow morning and give me your own bill—mind, *your own bill*—for the amount which you owe me."

"I will be with you punctually at ten o'clock," said Malpas, deriving no small consolation from the manner in which Emmerson seemed disposed to treat the affair.

They then took their departure from Mrs. Gale's establishment.

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Meantime the Earl of Curzon had been lounging in a restless manner upon the sofa in the dining-room in Grosvenor Street, or else pacing uneasily to and fro like a chafing lion in his cage: and every now and then he had recourse to the wine-decanter. But instead of soothing his agitated thoughts, the juice of the grape added an artificial stimulant to that natural excitement which was torturing him; and though his spirit was so restless, the time hung insupportably heavy upon his hands.

At length the time-piece upon the mantle struck eleven; and a few minutes afterwards the carriage drove up to the front door of the house. The Earl composed his features as well as he was able, and went out into the hall to meet his wife—for he felt anxious to have some conversation with her, although he had not made up his mind what to say, or how to turn the wished-for discourse upon any topic which might suit his own purposes. But he was in one of those humours when a man of excitable temperament must have his say, even if for no other end than to pick a quarrel and find an issue for his pent-up spleen.

"I hope you have passed a pleasant evening," he said, accosting the lady, as she was hurrying through the hall, enveloped in the handsome cloak and with her thick veil drawn over her countenance, just as he had seen her when entering the carriage at half-past seven o'clock. "Hey-day! what does this mean?" he exclaimed petulantly, as she swept abruptly past him—flitted up stairs—and disappeared from his view all in a moment.

With another cause for ill-humour, he was returning to the parlour when the sounds of light footsteps and the rustling of garments met his ears: and look-round, he caught a glimpse of the cloak of the pretty lady's-maid, as the wearer was also hastening up the marble-staircase. The Earl hurried after her and overtook her on the landing.

"Gertrude," he said, catching her by the arm and speaking in a low rapid whisper, "for heaven's sake, do not mention to your mistress what occurred just now;"—and as he uttered these words, he strove with piercing looks to penetrate the thick veil which was also worn by her whom he thus addressed.

But breaking abruptly away from him, and without a syllable of reply, she bounded up the next flight of stairs.

"Perdition seize the women," muttered the Earl to himself, as he slowly retraced his steps to the dining-room. "What the devil possesses them both? My wife sweeps past me in the hall as if I had the plague—and Gertrude breaks away from me on the landing as if contact with me were contagion. Then this mania of wearing their veils up to their very bedrooms, as if they dared not look a man in the face!"

And the Earl walked to and fro in the parlour with uneven steps and agitated feelings.

He waited ten minutes in the hope that his wife would come down previously to retiring for the night: but as she did not make her appearance, he resolved to go up to her boudoir and either induce her to join him at the supper-table, or else remain and converse with her in her own room. But as he was ascending the stairs he met Gertrude face to face.

The beautiful girl had laid aside her bonnet, veil, and cloak—and she could not help encountering the Earl's looks. A smile of ineffable archness and mischievous meaning appeared upon her pouting lips, as she thus met his gaze: but she was hurrying past him when he once more caught her by the arm and held her firmly.

"You have not breathed a word to your mistress?" he said, in a hurried whisper.

"No, my lord—not a word," she replied, with a singularly wicked and roguish look. "But you deserve that I should have shown you no mercy after your rude treatment."

"I know you will pardon me, pretty Gertrude," he said. "But why would you not speak to me just now on the landing.

"Why, my lord!" echoed the abigail: "because I heard other footsteps upon the stairs—at least I thought so—and likewise because I was afraid her ladyship would be angry with me for staying out so late. I was ordered to be home by half-past ten—and it was after eleven when I got back. The carriage drove up to the door just as I was descending the area-steps."

"And where had you been, Gertrude?" inquired the Earl, thinking that the lady's-maid was not so cruel after all, inasmuch as she now conversed with tolerable freedom and apparent good-humour.

"I passed the evening with my parents, my lord," she replied, looking however as if she felt annoyed by the question: "and it was with the permission of her ladyship," she added pointedly.

"Which is as much as to say that I have no right to inquire into your movements," observed the nobleman, affecting to smile. "Come, tell me candidly—are you very, very angry with me for my conduct of this evening?"

"Let me go, my lord, and I will tell you," said Gertrude.

"Now, then—you are free," observed the Earl, as he let go his grasp on her arm.

The lady's-maid flung another look of unspeakable archness upon him, and flitted down the stairs with the speed and lightness of a spirit.

"The little minx!" muttered Curzon to himself. "But she is not quite such a prude after all—and she shall yet be mine!"

The little interview with the lady's-maid, being of a more satisfactory nature than his two former attempts to engage her in conversation, put the nobleman into a somewhat better humour—especially as he had received from her lips the assurance that his conduct was not reported to his wife. For, although he had not on previous occasions been equally solicitous to veil his irregularities from her knowledge, he did not wish to appear ridiculous in her eyes as having met with so mortifying a rebuff from her maid—nor was he desirous that such a circumstance should reach her ears at the very time he was seeking for proofs of her own suspected infidelity.

One weight was therefore lifted from the Earl's mind: and now, becoming capable of calmer reasoning than for the last two or three hours, he saw the impossibility of as yet making any positive

charge against his wife, or of even alluding to Lady Lechmere's ambiguous note without admitting that he had searched the writing-desk in Editha's absence. Moreover, he had now hopes of winning Gertrude to his interests: and as she was evidently in the confidence of her mistress, it was important to glean from her lips those secrets of which she had a knowledge.

Such were the reflections which swept all in a moment through the mind of the Earl, as he lingered upon the stairs after Gertrude had flitted away so abruptly: and no longer yearning to precipitate matters with Editha, he once more retraced his steps to the parlour.

Ringing the bell, he ordered the servant who answered the summons, to inquire whether Editha was coming down to supper: and the response was to the effect that the Countess had supped at Lady Lechmere's, but would join his lordship in a few minutes.

The nobleman therefore sate down to the repast; and his wife presently made her appearance, laughing and in the best possible humour.

"My dear Charles," she said, tapping him playfully upon the cheek as she passed behind him to take a chair, "you must have thought it very strange—very rude—and very unkind in me to hasten away so abruptly when you spoke to me in the hall as I came from the carriage: but I was labouring under a cruel misconception at the time. In fact, I heard it whispered at Lady Lechmere's, about nine o'clock, that you had just been seen at the Haymarket Theatre in company with a female of notorious profligacy. You may therefore conceive how annoyed I was. But I have just learnt that you have been at home all the evening—and therefore the accusation must have arisen in sheer wickedness or downright error."

"But who could possibly have told you such a thing?" demanded the Earl, with mingled astonishment and indignation.

"Now I am not going to get you into a quarrel with any one," replied Editha, in the softest tone and the most caressing manner. "Besides, it was an elderly lady whom I overheard mentioning the circumstance to another antiquated gossip; and it was not intended for my ears. So you must ask me nothing more upon the subject. Suffice it to say that the imputation was a calumny."

"But if I had found Leveson at home and had remained to pass the evening with him," said Lord Curzon, "you would have believed the tale and fancied that I was really at the Haymarket with a bad woman?"

"The affair would certainly have looked suspicious," observed Editha: "but it only proves that we should never be hasty in judging from appearances."

"True!" exclaimed the Earl, struck by the observation: then, after a few minutes' pause, during which he drank a glass of wine, he said, "It is a pity that husbands and wives ever keep any secrets from each other: the habit breeds distrust—and distrust embitters their existence."

"Are you going to turn over a new leaf?" inquired the Countess, laughing gaily. "Your whole manner, conduct, and language to-day induce me to think so."

"But if I have my secrets from you, Editha," said the Earl, attentively watching her countenance as he spoke, "have you none which you keep from me?"

"None, that may properly be called secrets," she replied, apparently with the utmost sincerity: and therefore the reader will perceive that she was as thorough a proficient in the arts of hypocrisy as we have already described her.

"I am glad of it, my love," exclaimed the Earl, completely staggered by the candour of her response and the ingenuousness of her looks: and again he reflected upon her observation relative to the imprudence of judging rashly by appearances.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE CHANDLER'S SHOP.

Mutton Hill is a small section of that large and loathsome neighbourhood which lies immediately behind the Sessions House on Clerkenwell Green. At the period of which we are writing, as well as at the present day, it consisted principally of second-hand furniture warehouses, old-clothes' emporiums, and shops devoted to the sale of sweet stuff, chandlery, shell-fish, coals and potatoes, and cheap crockery.

The chandler's shop requires especial attention. It was small, dingy in outward appearance, and gloomy-looking internally. Over the door was painted, in little white letters on a black ground, the name of William Taggarty; and under this name, in smaller letters still, were the words, *Licensed Dealer in Tea, Coffee, Tobacco, and Snuff.* The door, which was half-glazed, usually stood open as long as it was light: but when evening began to draw in, it was closed—a tinkling bell being suspended above to give notice of the entrance of a customer. On a shelf, or ledge, which ran along the middle of the window, appeared an array of small glasses containing brandy-balls, peppermint-sticks, bull's-eyes, hard-bake, acid drops, barley-sugar, candy, horehound, lollipops, and other sweets of the same school of confectionery. On the board in the lower part of the window, appeared bundles of fire-wood, Flanders' bricks, red herrings, a basket of eggs, a huge piece of Cheshire cheese, three or four ditto Glo'ster, some bottles of blacking, five or six bars of yellow soap, a few loaves of bread, a piece of bacon, a bladder of hog's lard, a box of "real havannahs" made of cabbage leaves, some jars of pickles, and a small box of starch. Suspended to the wood-work of the windows, and dangling amidst the necessaries and luxuries just enumerated, were divers bunches of candles—sixes, eights, middling tens, and farthing rushlights.

On the shelves behind the counter were a few canisters of tea and coffee—some jars of snuff and tobacco—and a miscellaneous assortment of tinder-boxes, tapes, laces, balls of cotton and worsted, papers of pins and needles, brushes, balls of twine, and "rounds" of matches with sharp yellow points looking like the beaks of callow birds—"lucifers" not being invented in those times. The counter itself was furnished with drawers containing sugars of divers descriptions: and above it, to a horizontal beam, hung a farther supply of candles, forming a thick fringe of tallow. At one end of the counter

stood more loaves, a block of salt, a firkin of butter, and a tin treacle-can. Against the wall rested a nine-gallon cask of very small beer, with two or three measures in readiness to serve out the poor thin fluid; and in one corner of the shop was a group of mops, brooms, and brushes. A nest of little drawers, with the labels thumbed and fingered into perfect illegibility, but doubtless containing pepper, mustard, spices, and such like articles, was discernible in the other corner of this complete and interesting emporium of commerce.

The sole proprietor of the establishment was Mr. William Taggarty, as the name above the street-door irrefragably proved. But who was the happy owner of so compendious an assortment of articles — or, as the brokers' advertisements in newspapers would have described it, this snug concern? We are bound, for truth's sake, to admit that the appellation of Taggarty was merely an assumed one for convenience' sake, and that the individual bearing it was none other than the Kinchin-Grand alluded to by Jack the Foundling in his conversation with Mr. Lawrence Sampson.

Behind the shop there was a small parlour—a very tiny place, just capable of holding a little round table and three chairs, and quite filled whenever those chairs were all occupied. If we look into this parlour at about nine o'clock in the evening, on the day after the occurrences chronicled in the previous chapter, we shall find Mr. William Taggarty seated in earnest conversation with Richard and Sarah Melmoth.

These two last mentioned individuals have already been described: it is therefore only necessary to observe that Taggarty was a man about thirty-five years of age — thin — with a sort of shopkeeper's stoop in his gait—and having a certain greasy appearance, as if his head were constantly coming in contact with the candles suspended over his counter, and his hands were being incessantly wiped upon his dingy apron.

Upon the little round table stood a bottle of gin and three glasses: for Mr. Taggarty was regaling his visitors, while discussing with them certain matters of importance.

"And so you are quite sure that Jack didn't peach agin the Hangman?" said Taggarty, as he refilled the glasses.

"I'm certain he didn't," replied Dick Melmoth. "He was staying with Larry Sampson at the time, as I've already told you——"

"Then the more likely that he *did* blab," observed Taggarty.

"How the devil could he, when I tell you that none of us knowed anything about the matter until we saw it in the papers on Tuesday morning?" exclaimed Dick Melmoth. "Neither me or Sal was told of it beforehand—and therefore I'm sure Jack the Foundling wasn't. Mr. Coffin kept it precious close to himself, and had no assistants except the footman who was killed!"

"Let me see," said Taggarty, in a musing tone, "it took place on Sunday night——"

"Yes—and this is Friday," remarked Melmoth. "Jack the Foundling came home on Tuesday, as soon as he saw the affair in the paper. He sneaked away unbeknown to Larry Sampson: and the instant he came into the shop in Fleet Lane, he burst out crying, saying to Sal and me, '*You don't think I had any hand in this?*' We knowed what he meant; for we had just been reading the account in the paper; and we told him at once that we didn't suspect him. He seemed quite cheered by that assurance."

"Yes, that he did!" exclaimed Sal. "I'm sure he had nothing to do with it:"—and what with the effects of gin and grief, she began to whimper.

"Well, it's a bad business," said Taggarty, shaking his head. "And yet there's one consolation," he added after a pause.

"What's that?" demanded Sally Melmoth, eagerly.

"Why, that a man who is drowned can't be hanged," replied the chandler very seriously.

"Ah! well, so it is," observed the woman, also shaking her head: then, having drained her glass, she continued in a whimpering tone, "Poor Daniel's gone for ever! Who'd have thought that he was born to be drowned in the Thames? I'm sure I shall never drink another drop of *that* water as long as I live," she added: and thus speaking, she held out her glass for Taggarty to refill it with gin.

"But who could have peached?" said this individual, as he did the honours with the bottle. "You see that the constables were concealed already in the house at Richmond——"

"Perhaps the footman himself had either repented, or else was a traitor all along," observed Dick Melmoth: "and may be that Mr. Coffin meant to shoot him, though the papers say he aimed the pistol at Larry Sampson."

"Well, that's likely enough," said Taggarty. "And now, what are you going to do? Shall you keep the shop open in Fleet Lane?"

"To be sure," replied Dick. "How the devil are we to live unless we do?"

"Ah! that's right," said Taggarty. "Don't go back to your old practices, unless it is in a quiet way: but at all events keep the shop as a *blind*. Look at me, my dear friends—I'm getting on well, and without no danger too. I keep my hands from wrongfully prigging: but if a feller brings in a cheese to sell—or a ham—or a bit of bacon—or what not, I don't ask any questions but give him a trifle for the goods. *He* may have filched them: but no one can bring the thing home to *me*. Ah! them was rum times when we was all together at the Kinchin-ken in Grub Street, and when the poor Shickster was alive! Wouldn't she have been proud to serve behind that there counter in such a snug concern as this?" added the chandler, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the shop.

"Well, it is a nice place—so compact!" observed Dick Melmoth, glancing around from the parlour towards the magazine of miscellaneous goods.

"By the bye," said Taggarty, "you haven't told me how Jack the Foundling was treated at Larry Sampson's."

"Oh! like a prince," answered Dick. "He says that he feels all manner of kind and grateful things towards Mr. Sampson; and he was sorry to be compelled to leave him. But he couldn't stay after the business down at Richmond. He says that he knows Mr. Sampson only performed his duty in that respect: but still he had not the heart to remain with the man who may be said to be the cause of poor Coffin's death."

"Of course," observed Taggarty. "For if Sampson and his people hadn't been planted there, the Hangman wouldn't have run off and been drowned in the river. That's quite clear."

"Quite clear indeed," whimpered Sally Melmoth, again seeking consolation in the gin.

At this moment the shop-bell tinkled as the glazed door was opened by some one entering the place; and Taggarty, observing that it was no doubt some customer, hastened from the parlour, closing the door behind him. Immediately afterwards, Dick and Sally Melmoth heard the outer door shut again also: then an ejaculation of amazement, bursting from Taggarty's lips, met their ears;—and this was followed by some hurried and subdued whispering between that individual and the person who had just entered the shop.

"Something's going on," said Dick Melmoth in a low voice to his sister.

But before the woman could make any reply, Taggarty re-appeared, followed by a man so muffled up in a great thick coat, a shawl neckerchief, and a slouched hat, that he was not immediately recognizable. But a presentiment of the truth flashed to the mind of Sally Melmoth: and starting at once from her seat, she exclaimed, "It's Daniel!"

"Yes, it's me safe enough," said the Hangman, in a surly tone, as he laid aside his hat and shawl neckerchief: then having submitted somewhat impatiently to the caresses of his paramour, who was quite maudlin with strong drink,—and after shaking Dick Melmoth by the hand,—he sate down between the astonished pair.

Taggarty hastened to bolt the street-door: then, returning into the parlour, he poured out a tumbler full of gin, which he handed to Coffin, who at once partook of a deep draught.

"Well, I suppose you're rather surprised to see me," said the Hangman, gasping with the effects of the potent fluid which for nearly a minute took away his breath. "No doubt you thought I was dead and gone? I've seen the newspapers, and find that the belief is I was drowned. Well, so much the better. But it's a precious bad job, after all."

"Bad indeed," observed Sal. "I suppose you won't be able to come home again in a hurry?"

"I don't see how the deuce I'm ever to come home again at all," replied the Hangman, his countenance assuming an expression of diabolical ferocity, as if he thought the whole world had turned against him. "There's only two chances for me—and they're not likely to come about."

"What are they?" inquired the Melmoths, speaking as it were in the same breath.

"Why, one is the death of Larry Sampson," answered Coffin: "because if he was out of the way, the other constables could be easily bought over to say they couldn't identify me as the burglar. I know 'em all well enough to be aware of what a ten-pound note would do with each."

"And what is the other chance?" inquired Taggarty.

"Why, if there's somebody to be hung and no one to hang him, some fine morning," returned Coffin, "a free pardon for any past offences would be offered to the individual that would take the place of the executioner: and then I might come forward and step easy enough into my old berth. Those are the two chances: but they're far away off at present and no mistake."

"Less probable things have come about," observed Taggarty.

"Well, we shall see," said Coffin. "Where's Jack?" he demanded, abruptly.

"At home again," answered Dick. "You don't suspect him at all?"

"Not a bit of it," rejoined the Hangman. "He wasn't aware that such a thing was in contemplation at Richmond at all. But I can guess how it was. Me and the footman—poor fellow!—was foolish enough to discuss our plans one night last week in a tap-room at Richmond, where a country bumpkin was getting his supper. We thought he went to sleep after he'd gorged himself with bread and cheese: but he must have shammed, and so overheard what we said. It was infernally stupid on our part: it's cost the poor devil of a footman his life, and made me a sort of exile and wanderer like Cain. Perdition take the whole business!" added Daniel, with savage earnestness.

"But what have you been doing all this time?" asked Dick Melmoth: "and how did you manage to escape drowning?"

"Oh! the tide carried me ashore a little way lower down than where I jumped in," responded Coffin; "and then I cut across to Beechey Manor—you know the place," he observed, with a significant glance at Dick Melmoth. "There I've been hiding until now: but I got so deuced tired of living cooped up in a small bed-room, and the two old servants have shown so much uneasiness at my presence, that I could endure it all no longer. So I got this thick coat, this broad-brimmed hat, and that shawl neckerchief of the old fellow, and resolved to come and pay my friend Bill Taggarty a visit. If you two hadn't been here by accident, I should have got Bill to run down to Fleet Lane and fetch you up to meet me. So now you know all about it."

"But what are you going to do?—and where do you mean to live?" asked Sally Melmoth.

"Well, I haven't exactly made up my mind," returned Coffin. "You must continue at the shop, and let people fancy you still believe me to have been drowned. I have got plenty of blunt—that's one good thing: and it's fortunate it was all in gold, or else the soaking I enjoyed in the Thames would have spoilt flimsy-notes beyond all redemption. Perhaps I shall stay with Bill Taggarty for a time:—he's all alone in this house——ain't you, Bill?"

"Yes—I'm all alone," was the chandler's response: but it was given with an evident aversion to the proposed sojourn of the Hangman at his house.

"Or else I shall go over to Bencull's crib at the Folly Bridges," continued the Hangman, not choosing to observe the disinclination of Bill Taggarty to harbour him as a guest.

"Hark!" said the chandler, abruptly: "there's a knock at the street door."

"And rather an impatient one, too," added Daniel Coffin, rising from his seat with evident trepidation. "I mustn't be seen here by any body, Bill, you know."

"Then just step up-stairs along with Sal and Dick," said Taggarty, opening a door and thus disclosing a flight of narrow steps formed as it were in a recess. "It may be some one that I must see—and you'll be more quiet up in my bed-room."

The Hangman took up his hat and neckerchief—Sally Melmoth possessed herself of the gin—and Dick laid hands on the glasses: they then all three

AGATHA AND EMMA OWEN.

hastened up-stairs, Taggarty shutting the door behind them. He then proceeded to open the shop-door; and the rays of the candle which he held in his hand, fell full upon the countenance of Mr. Larry Sampson.

The first and most natural thought which instantaneously flashed to the mind of Taggarty, was that the Bow Street Officer had traced the Hangman thither and was come to arrest him; and the chandler's looks accordingly grew troubled, for he felt that he was suddenly involved in no small danger for harbouring the delinquent.

"Good evening, Mr. Taggarty," said Sampson, in his usual quiet manner, and not appearing to notice the confusion of the chandler. "I want to have a little conversation with you if you are disengaged."

"With me, sir?" exclaimed Taggarty, flinging a rapid glance into the street and experiencing some relief on observing that the officer was apparently alone, or at all events had not a posse of constables at his back. "With me, sir?" he repeated, in a less incoherent manner.

"Yes—upon no *professional* business, however," replied Larry, emphatically: for he failed not to observe that his presence was very far from welcome.

"Walk in, sir—walk in," said Taggarty, endeavouring to look as composed and unconcerned as possible: and, having shut and bolted the door again, he conducted the officer into his little parlour. "Pray sit down, Mr. Sampson—let me take your hat—there, make yourself at home, sir. And now, shall it be gin, rum, or brandy?"

"Neither, thank you, Mr. Taggarty," was the response. "I hope I am not intruding upon you at this moment: but you appear to be all alone."

"Oh! yes—quite alone, Mr. Sampson," replied the chandler—but with just a sufficiency of lingering uneasiness to throw some doubt upon the assertion: and as he glanced mechanically towards the door of the staircase, Sampson at once perceived that

although the chandler might have been alone in that room. he assuredly was not alone in the house previous to his (the officer's) arrival.

"I want to speak to you upon a very particular and important matter," said Larry, in a low and confidential tone,—"a matter which, if you can serve me in it, will put a hundred guineas into your pocket."

Taggarty instantaneously thought within himself that Sampson wanted him to betray Daniel Coffin into his hands: and his mind was at once made up not to have anything to do with an affair that would inevitably bring all the Hangman's confederates and accomplices, from every part of London, like a hornet's nest, about his ears. He accordingly said, "If it's any dirty work, Mr. Sampson. I shan't do it."

"I do not think you will look upon it as dirty work at all," responded the officer, still speaking in a low and guarded tone. "But tell me frankly whether we can converse in this room without the chance of being overheard."

"Well, there'a a young o'oman of my acquaintance up-stairs, doing out the bed-chamber," answered Taggarty: "and if she listens, she may overhear us."

"Then will you step round with me to the nearest public-house?" asked Sampson.

"The truth is I am expecting a friend or two," replied the chandler; "and I can't very well leave. But just say in a whisper what the business is about."

"It is relative to a lad called Jack the Foundling," rejoined the officer, looking Taggarty very hard in the face.

"And what about him?" asked the latter, eagerly.

"That is just the question which I am going to put to you," said Larry. "Now, I want to ascertain all the particulars I can possibly glean concerning the infancy of that lad; and if you will assist me, there are a hundred guineas in my pocket at your service."

"A hundred guineas?" repeated Taggarty, his eyes brightening: "I must sell a great many pen'norths of tea and slices of cheese to scrape that sum together! Well, sir, what is it you wish to know?" he asked in a very subdued voice.

"I am already aware," responded Larry, "that a great mystery envelopes the birth of the lad. He was either found or stolen; and it was a boy called James Melmoth who took him, when a babe, to the den in Grub Street, whence you have derived your nickname of the Kinchin-Grand. I also know that the present Richard and Sarah Melmoth, who have been living with the deceased Daniel Coffin, are the brother and sister of that James Melmoth of whom I have spoken, but who has long been dead. I am moreover aware that your late mistress, Shickster Sal, brought up the Foundling."

"Then, if you know all this, Mr. Sampson," said Taggarty, "what more can you expect to glean from me?"—and the chandler now felt easier in his mind, because he saw, from an observation just made by Larry, that he really supposed the Hangman to have been drowned, and that consequently his visit to Mutton Hill at such a moment was purely an accidental coincidence.

"I expect to glean from you any additional information which you may be enabled to impart," said Sampson. "In the first place, endeavour to recollect the precise date on which the babe was brought to the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street."

"It was the 1st of June, 1795," answered Taggarty.

"How do you recollect the date so well?" inquired Larry Sampson.

"Because I remember that it was the day before James Melmoth's father murdered Sir Richard Stamford in Windsor Park, and then blew out his own brains," was Taggarty's response.

"It was not known for some time afterwards that the assassin of the baronet was the same wretched man whose previous enormities had so horrified the metropolis."

"But I knew it was the same man," observed Taggarty, in a scarcely audible whisper; "because his son, young James, told me so at the time. Afterwards I mentioned the circumstance to my pals—it got talked about—and this was the way the public at length knew that James Melmoth, senior, was the assassin of Sir Richard Stamford."

"Now, was not the babe stolen by that man and his son James?" asked Sampson.

"He was," replied Taggarty. "I don't see any harm in telling you the real truth now."

"Certainly not. And it was in Hyde Park that the babe was thus stolen?"

"It was. But you seem to know all about it," said the chandler, in surprise. "Yet I do not see how you can possibly have learnt this: for I have never divulged the secret until now. Neither Dick nor Sal Melmoth knew so much about the business. They were children at the time it happened: but their eldest brother James made me his confidant to a certain extent."

"Did he tell you whose child it was?" asked Sampson.

"No. He had sworn a most solemn oath to his father not to reveal the secret of the child's parentage until it was at least twelve years of age."

"Do you know why the Melmoths stole the child?" demanded Larry.

"Because they had some dreadful spite against its parents, I believe. But you are perhaps aware that young James Melmoth died a violent death within a few days after his father's suicide: and thus in the interval he had not much leisure to be over-communicate with me."

"Is this all you know?" inquired Larry Sampson: then, seeing that Taggarty hesitated, he produced a bag of gold and counted down a hundred guineas upon the table, saying, "If you can give me any farther proofs relative to the circumstances of which we have been speaking, this sum is yours."

"Stop a moment," observed Taggarty. "If the Foundling should turn out to be the son of wealthy or great folks, how do I know but what I shall get into trouble for having been a sort of accessory to the harbouring of him after he was stolen?"

"I will give you a written guarantee that no harm shall befall you," replied Sampson.

"Your word will do, sir," rejoined the chandler. "And now I will fetch you the only proofs that I can put into your hands—but they will no doubt be found convincing enough."

Having thus spoken, Taggarty rose and ascended the staircase, shutting the door carefully behind him. On entering the bed-room up-stairs, he found the Hangman, Dick Melmoth, and Sally, engaged in earnest conversation together upon their future plans and proceedings under existing circumstances: but they were all astounded and alarmed when the

chandler informed them that his guest was none other than the terrible Lawrence Sampson!

In a few hurried words, however, and in a whispered tone, Taggarty explained to them the object of the officer's visit, whereat they were profoundly surprised; but the chandler did not vouchsafe to inform them that Sampson's liberality had extended to a hundred guineas. He was afraid they might claim shares, the matter having reference to the Foundling, in whom they were all interested. He therefore coolly and quietly suppressed an 0, thus reducing the reward from 100 to 10 guineas.

Having given these few hurried explanations, he unlocked a drawer—took out a brown paper parcel—and was about to descend to the parlour again when Daniel Coffin clutched him abruptly by the arm, saying in a hollow whisper, "Bill, are you man enough to do me a service?"

"What do you want?" asked Taggarty, recoiling, with an instinctive shudder: for the Hangman's meaning flashed in a moment to his comprehension.

"Larry Sampson is below," replied Coffin: "and those who might have seen him come in, won't be waiting to observe if he ever goes out again," he added with a look of diabolical significancy.

"No, no—I couldn't do it, Dan'el—I couldn't do it!" answered Taggarty, his countenance becoming pale as death, and his knees trembling under him.

"Coward!" ejaculated the Hangman, with bitter ferocity, as he pushed the chandler away from him: then, instantly observing the malignant expression of vindictiveness which appeared upon Taggarty's countenance, he said, "Come, don't be angry, Bill—I didn't mean it! But you must make allowances for one placed in such an infernal predicament as I am."

"Yes, pray don't think any more of it, Bill," said Sally Melmoth, in a tone of earnest entreaty: and Dick also endeavoured to propitiate the chandler.

"You needn't suppose I should betray you, Dan'el," observed Taggarty.

"But will you help me to—to——"

"To make away with Larry Sampson? No!"

And with this emphatic reply, the chandler quitted the room.

Descending to the parlour, he again carefully closed the door of the staircase behind him; and resuming his seat, he opened the brown paper parcel. But his hands trembled visibly—and his cheeks were also still pale and ghastly from the mingled sensations excited by the scene that had just occurred in the bed-chamber above. Larry Sampson, upon whose keenness even the least perceptible emotion was never lost, could not fail to observe an agitation so marked as this; but he affected not to notice it—while all the time he was wondering what could have produced such an impression upon the Kinchin-Grand, and who the person or persons might be that had so produced it.

"What have you got there, Taggarty?" he inquired.

"The clothes the Foundling had on the day he was stolen and brought to the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street," was the answer: then, as Taggarty proceeded to open the parcel and display its contents, he said, "Here's the hat and feathers—the little frock, all covered with neat braiding, somewhat faded now notwithstanding—and here's the petticoats, the little socks, and the tiny shoes. I've always kept them things by me through every wicissitude: for somehow or another, I thought they'd be of service sooner or later."

"You have acted well and wisely," said the officer. "Take the hundred guineas—and I shall keep these things. I suppose you meant me to do so?"

"By all manner of means," replied Taggarty, as he tied up the parcel again. "And now, Mr. Sampson, won't you take a drop of summut short?"

"I would much rather not, thank you," returned Larry. "Good night."

The chandler having hastily gathered up the money and consigned the coin to his pocket, proceeded to unfasten the shop-door to let Mr. Sampson out: and as soon as the officer disappeared, he shut and bolted it again.

But Larry did not immediately quit the neighbourhood. He was resolved to wait and see who the person or persons might be, that were secreted in Mr. Taggarty's upper room. His mode of action was decisively determined on, and promptly carried into execution. Entering the shop of an old-clothes' dealer, to whom he was well known, he remained there only five minutes, and issued forth again completely metamorphosed from head to foot. In fact, he was apparelled as an old woman, with a dark brown cloak, and the hood drawn over his countenance, which was further shaded by a dingy cap having an enormous frill. He carried a bundle of matches in his hand—and in this disguise posted himself exactly opposite the door of the chandler's shop.

Nearly an hour passed: and no one came forth. But several halfpence were thrust into Sampson's hand by poor working-men and their wives returning home, and who took him to be an aged beggar-woman. He was sorry thus to receive the donations of humble charity: but he could not refuse them, for fear of exciting suspicion and perhaps leading to detection and disturbance.

Time passed on—midnight was proclaimed by the iron tongue of Clerkenwell church—and still Larry stayed at his post. He would have remained there till morning, if necessary: but observing no lights in Taggarty's bed-room, he felt assured that the chandler had not as yet retired to rest. Presently the shop door opened — and Taggarty himself appeared upon the threshold, looking anxiously up and down. Sampson, in a whining voice, besought charity: but the chandler, taking no heed of the prayer, retired into the shop. Immediately afterwards a woman came forth as far as the threshold, and also looked intently up and down the narrow street. A light from an opposite window gleamed upon her countenance; and Sampson had no difficulty in recognising Sally Melmoth.

She retired into the shop, the door of which still remained open; and in a few minutes Dick Melmoth, whom Larry also recognised, came forward with the evident object of ascertaining if the coast was clear. Sampson saw that something strange was going on: but of what it was, he had not the most distant suspicion. He nevertheless determined to ascertain the point, if possible—and was rejoiced that he had thus kept watch upon the chandler's premises.

Dick Melmoth having retired again as the others had done, there was another pause in the proceedings: and then, at the expiration of about two minutes, a man hurried forth and sped down the hill towards the Sessions House. He was muffled

in a great thick coat—wore a broad-brimmed hat, much slouched over his features—and all the lower part of his face was concealed in a thick shawl neckerchief.

"Do, dear sir, for the love of heaven, bestow your charity on a poor old woman," said Larry Sampson, with the piteous whine of mendicancy, as he passed close up to the side of the man.

"Get out, you old crone!" growled the fellow, his eyes glaring savagely from beneath the broad-brimmed hat: and, thus speaking, he bolted round the corner—passed behind the Sessions House—and gained Turnmill Street.

For the first time in his life Larry Sampson was thrown quite aback for the moment. His purpose was so far answered that he had succeeded in catching a glimpse of the man's features: but his amazement may be understood when he found that the muffled individual was none other than Daniel Coffin the Hangman! The unmistakable tone of the voice simultaneously confirmed the fact; and if farther proof were wanting, it was at once seen in the circumstance that Dick and Sally Melmoth were at Taggarty's when he issued forth, and that such care had been taken to ascertain that the coast was clear for his exit thence.

Speedily recovering his self-possession, however, Larry Sampson instantaneously revolved in his mind the difficulties of his position. His first impulse was to fling off the old woman's garb and hasten in pursuit: but a rescue was certain to be effected in that vile neighbourhood the instant the alarm of "an officer" should be raised. Moreover, the disguise would be found—Coffin would hear of it and suspect who the old beggar-woman was—and, perceiving that his existence was known, he would either double his precautions against discovery, or else leave the country. On the other hand, to retain the disguise and pursue him in it, would only be to attract certain attention, without frustrating the chances of Coffin's rescue or escape. Sampson therefore retraced his way to his friend the old-clothes dealer—laid aside the cloak and cap—and proceeded homeward, with the intention of losing no time in setting a watch upon all the places and neighbourhoods where the Hangman was likely to conceal himself.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE JOURNEY TO PARIS.

Let us now return to Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen, who had embarked at Woolwich on board a revenue cruiser, to be conveyed to France. They were attended by an elderly gentlewoman who served as a sort of duenna, or guardian, and who had long been intimate with Mrs. Owen, the young ladies' delectable mother. She was a widow—her name was Ranger—and, having no ostensible means of income, was very glad to make money by any means, no matter what intrigue or machination might be involved in the service entrusted to her.

She was not, however, entirely in the secret of the young ladies' mission to the Continent. She knew that they were to enter the household of the Princess of Wales: she was likewise well aware that the Royal Princes had for some time past been frequent visitors at the mansion at Richmond;—and her idea of female virtue was not of such an exalted character as to induce her to suppose that a mere platonic friendship had subsisted between the Misses Owen and the voluptuary-sons of George III. The construction she therefore put upon the matter was that the young ladies, having bestowed their favours upon the Princes, were rewarded by obtaining, through their indirect influence and recommendations, lucrative posts in the household of the Princess of Wales.

Mrs. Ranger herself was the most plausible woman in existence, though in reality a perfect Hecate of iniquity. She was indeed ten thousand times worse than Mrs. Owen suspected her to be. This lady fancied that she was merely an astute, clever, and shrewd woman,—not over particular how she made money nor in what service she was enlisted,—but fully trustworthy by an employer: whereas Mrs. Ranger was in reality a thoroughly unprincipled, artful, and abandoned wretch, capable of selling the charms and making a market of the young girls confided to her care. She had smiled inwardly when Mrs. Owen, on giving her last instructions, had enjoined her to keep a careful watch over the virtue of her daughters: but externally she had assumed a matronly and duenna-like air, confirming with the most sacred assurances the impression which this staid and cautious aspect had left upon the mother's mind.

Her personal appearance was as false as her mind. She used cosmetics with so elaborate a skill and so ingeniously supplied the faded charms and wrinkled deformities of nature with the succedaneous remedies of art, that her withered form assumed a buxom shape and her countenance bore a richer bloom than ever had clothed it even in the spring-tide of her youth. She was midway between fifty and sixty: but what with false hair, false teeth, and the various artificial appliances alluded to, she managed to pass herself off as at least ten years younger.

It will be remembered that Mary Owen had withdrawn herself from any farther share in the secret conspiracy hatched under royal auspices against the honour, happiness, and even life of the Princess Caroline of Wales: Agatha, Emma, and Julia accordingly embarked without their youngest sister at Woolwich, under the protection of Mrs. Ranger. As a matter of course, they were accompanied by no end of trunks, band-boxes, and packages—for, as the reader has already been informed, large sums were expended in giving the young ladies a handsome equipment for their new career. A government vessel had been appointed to convey them to Calais—for the power of steam was not in those days applied to navigation, and the ordinary means of reaching the Continent was by sailing-packet or hoy from Dover.

We should here pause for a moment to observe that this was the epoch of Napoleon's memorable abdication of the imperial dignity in France, and his retreat to the little sovereignty of Elba. Louis XVIII had been restored to his throne, an infamous Bourbon being thus given back to France: peace prevailed in Europe—and numerous English tourists were taking advantage of the cessation of hostilities to visit the continental countries.

The voyage from Woolwich to Calais was performed in about thirty hours, with a calm sea but a wind not altogether favourable. Mrs. Ranger was so ill, notwithstanding the smoothness of the passage, as to be compelled to keep her berth the whole time: but during daylight the three sisters remained upon the deck, conversing gaily and affably with the officers belonging to the vessel. On arriving at Dessin's hotel at Calais, the party was compelled to make a halt for a couple of days in order to enable Mrs. Ranger to recruit herself thoroughly ere she entered upon the formidable task of posting to Paris.

It was on a Wednesday afternoon that the Misses Owen and their duenna embarked at Woolwich: it was on the Thursday evening that they reached Calais—and it was not until Sunday morning that they proposed to resume their journey. Now, if the reader will refer to earlier chapters, he will find that it was on the Friday Jocelyn Loftus bade adieu to Louisa, with whom Mary Owen remained, at Canterbury; and we must add that it was on the Saturday that, having crossed in the sailing-packet from Dover to Calais, he also took up his quarters at Dessin's hotel.

We must remind our reader that this amiable, intelligent, and excellent young gentleman, ere setting out on his chivalrous enterprise, had pledged himself to Mary Owen not only to compromise her sisters as little as might be in the task he had undertaken, but also to use every attempt to persuade them to withdraw from the execrable service in which they were engaged. It was therefore his settled intention, on setting out upon his journey, to overtake them as speedily as possible—endeavour to form their acquaintance—and become their travelling-companion if opportunity should serve. For the farther development of his plans he naturally trusted to circumstances and to the chapter of accidents: but he was resolved to leave no stone unturned in order to rescue the Misses Owen from the abhorrent influences that now ruled their career, or at all events warn the Princess of Wales of the snake-like perils and insidious snares that were scattered in her path.

On arriving at Dessin's hotel late on Saturday evening, and on making inquiries of the waiter as to whether certain ladies had passed that way within the last day or two, Jocelyn was well pleased to learn that they were actually at the moment beneath the same roof. He also ascertained that they were to leave in a post-chaise on the following morning for Paris. He then asked whether he also could be accommodated with a travelling-chariot at about the same hour: but he learnt to his mortification that in consequence of the great influx of English visitors during the week, every disposable chaise and carriage in the town had been put into requisition, and that the one kept for Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen was the very last which could be obtained. There was however the chance of return-carriages arriving; and the waiter confidently promised one for the Monday.

Jocelyn however assured him that it was of the highest importance for him not only to depart on the following morning, but also to travel on to Paris without delay—and hence his desire to obtain a post-chaise instead of proceeding by the *diligence*, or stage-coach. The waiter looked at the young gentleman very attentively; and suspecting that he wished to become the travelling companion of the ladies, he adroitly hinted that such was his belief. This hint was given with the unmistakable manner of one who indirectly and covertly proffers his assistance to forward the design into which he penetrates: and Jocelyn, knowing the readiness of waiters in general, and French ones in particular, to perform such little services, at once said to the man, "Ten *louis* shall be your reward if you can induce those ladies of whom we have been speaking to accommodate me with a seat in their post-chaise."

The waiter spoke not a word, but with a significant look quitted the apartment. It was time to serve the ladies' supper; and as he attended upon them at the repast, Mrs. Ranger enjoined him to have the chaise in readiness at nine in the morning. He promised due observance of her command; and as she spoke French with fluency—as indeed did Agatha, Emma, and Julia—she made many inquiries about the condition of the roads, the probable state of the weather, the best hotels to stop at, and the chances of travellers being assailed by robbers. The waiter respooded to all these queries satisfactorily enough, except the last; and, with a considerable amount of apparent hesitation, he observed that the recent disbanding of a large number of the troops had thrown many desperate characters idle upon the world—that there were certainly cases of travellers being stopped—he was not even sure but that the outrage sometime occurred in the broad day-light—and that at all events it was much safer and more prudent for ladies to journey with a male protector.

These remarks, cunningly dropped, and instilling fear rather by inuendo than positive averments, produced the desired effect upon the ladies. Mrs. Ranger declared that she would much prefer the *diligence* to a post-chaise: Agatha would not hear of the stage-coach, but regretted that "mamma" had not provided them with a male attendant;—Emma sided with Mrs. Ranger relative to the propriety of travelling by the *diligence*—and Julia at once expressed a wish that they were acquainted with some gentleman who could accompany them. It was now that the waiter, as if struck by a sudden recollection, "took the liberty of observing that there was an English gentleman at that moment in the hotel, who was most anxious to travel post to Paris, but who could not obtain a conveyance:" and then, as if quite in a style of indifferent comment, the astute *garçon* continued to remark that "the young gentleman was certainly the handsomest, most agreeable, and most fascinating specimen of English travellers that had visited the hotel since the peace."

All this was quite enough to enlist the interest of the ladies on behalf of one who was so much pressed for the means of rapid conveyance to Paris: and moreover, they wanted a travelling-companion. Julia thought there could be no harm in offering their fellow-countryman a seat in their chaise: Emma expressed her opinion that it would be rude not to do so;—and Agatha still more emphatically insisted upon the propriety of asking him to join their party. Mrs. Ranger said in a bland tone that she saw no objection, provided he was *a real gentleman*: and the waiter's guarantee being taken in this respect, the said waiter was

duly and formally charged to conduct the negotiation.

Accordingly, this important plenipotentiary—doubtless fancying himself no mean imitation of the astute diplomatist Talleyrand—returned to Jocelyn's sitting-room; and the moment he made his appearance, his looks proclaimed the success of his enterprise. Loftus was well pleased thereat, and cheerfully paid the promised fee of ten *louis*, which the waiter still more joyfully consigned to his pocket.

Jocelyn then retired to his bed-chamber, and soon fell asleep, to dream of his beloved and lovely Louisa: while, on the other hand, Mrs. Ranger and her three fair charges sought their own apartments, well pleased with the prospect of an agreeable travelling-companion during their journey to Paris.

On the following morning Mr. Loftus received an invitation to breakfast with the ladies: and he was forthwith conducted to the room in which they were assembled. At the first glance which he threw upon Agatha, Emma, and Julia, the sentiment of mingled pity and indignation was deepened in his soul to think that such beautiful creatures should have become entangled in such detestable intrigues. He was however far from suspecting that beneath the air of lively, good-tempered artlessness which was natural to them, and which corrupting influences had not as yet materially impaired, there lurked all the nascent tendencies and inclinations towards that thorough depravity which the denizens of fashionable life are so skilled in veiling with smiles, affability, and the glitter of fascinating manners—as the hideousness of a corpse may be concealed with flowers. He believed them to be the unconscious and beguiled victims, rather than the now willing instruments, of the vilest machinations: and little suspecting that even their very maiden virtue and personal chastity had been sacrificed in the course of execrable training which they had undergone, he hoped to rescue them from the ways of intrigue and dishonour and render them worthy, as they were certainly brilliant, members of society.

Such were the thoughts which swept through the mind of Jocelyn Loftus on his introduction to the Misses Owen: but as for Mrs. Ranger, he experienced a thorough and unmitigated contempt for her ere he had been three minutes in her society. Not that he at once saw into the depths of her character: but he read enough, through the veil of plausibility wherewith she invested her words and her manners, to assure himself that she was false, hollow-hearted, vain, and cunning. This feeling of dislike he however studiously concealed: for it by no means suited his purpose to make an enemy of that lady at the very outset of their acquaintance.

The impression which his own appearance produced upon the ladies was at once of the most favourable character. His exceedingly handsome person, endowed with all the beauty and graces of youthful manhood—his elegant manners—the tones of his voice—and the unaffected yet fascinating style of his conversation and choice of language, could not fail to prove agreeable to an old coquette and three lively, animated, and impassioned girls. He was accordingly received with an evident welcome, whose warmth was only subdued by that habit of external formality which was rather practised from the ceremonial usages of drawing-rooms than really felt in all its rigid reserve.

The conversation at the breakfast-table was sprightly and sparkling: but the meal was somewhat hurried as the chaise was announced to be in readiness even before the party sate down. Then came the hurry and bustle of the preliminaries for departure: but as Jocelyn attended to the disposal of the luggage, a world of trouble, as Mrs. Ranger observed to the girls, was fortunately taken off their hands.

French travelling carriages, or *berlines*, are spacious and commodious vehicles, containing six persons inside without the necessity of much crowding. There was consequently ample room for the whole party. Mrs. Ranger and Julia occupied the back seat: Jocelyn was placed between the two elder girls on the front one. He had Agatha on his right hand, and Emma on his left: but though in such charming contact, his heart wavered not in its allegiance to the loved and absent Louisa—and he felt that it never would. Much rather would he have been at this moment with his betrothed: but he had undertaken a certain duty—and his present position was only one of the inevitable phases of that enterprise in which he had so generously and chivalrously embarked.

The equipage rolled out of the court-yard of Dessin's hotel—the drawbridge of the ramparts was crossed—and the vehicle, drawn by four horses with two postilions, entered on the broad road leading to Boulogne. Mrs. Ranger now thought it high time to let Jocelyn know that her three fair charges were proceeding to Italy in order to enter the service of the Princess of Wales: whereupon the young gentleman observed that he also was bound on a visit to the same sunny clime, giving his hearers to understand that his was a tour of recreation and pleasure, although in the first instance he had some important business to transact in Paris.

The eyes of the young ladies shone with unmistakable joy when they thus heard that their new acquaintance was proceeding all the way to Italy; and Mrs. Ranger inquired how long he purposed to remain in the French capital. He answered that a couple of days would suffice for the business which he had to conclude in that city: whereupon Agatha remarked how singular it was that *they* also intended to limit their halt in Paris to an equally brief period. The observation was too significant not to be seized upon as available for Jocelyn's purpose; and he expressed a hope that he might be permitted the honour of escorting the ladies as far as their destination in Italy. The proposition was received with many expressions of gratitude and much evident delight: but Jocelyn was somewhat surprised as well as secretly vexed and annoyed, when he observed that Agatha, the eldest sister, gazed upon him with a certain subdued tenderness as she breathed her thanks for the proposal he had just made.

He could not even help looking earnestly at her for a moment in order to assure himself that he had rightly interpreted the meaning of her gaze: but as her eyes fell beneath his own, and a fleeting blush appeared upon her cheeks, he fancied that he must have been deceived, and regretted

having thus regarded her in a manner which she might consider as savouring of rudeness or impertinence. But as the conversation turned upon different topics, it became clearly apparent that she had taken no offence: for she treated Jocelyn with a friendly but well-bred courtesy, as much as to imply that since it was agreed they were to be travelling companions on a very long journey, there was no necessity to regard each other as the mere acquaintances of a few hours. At least, such was the interpretation which the young gentleman now put upon her demeanour, as well as on the bearing of her two sisters and Mrs. Ranger: and as it was his object to gain the good opinion and the confidence of the three girls as speedily as was practicable under the circumstances, he of course encouraged all their friendly advances.

Thus by the time the party reached Boulogne to lunch, the ladies were already on very good terms with their handsome travelling-companion: and when they stopped in the evening to dine at Bernay, it would have seemed as if they had been acquainted for a whole year instead of a single day. Indeed Jocelyn was more than once inwardly and secretly vexed at the somewhat meaning looks of tenderness which Agatha cast upon him: but as those side-long and furtive glances were instantaneously withdrawn when she saw that they were noticed, he tranquillised himself with the hope that any feeling which the young lady might have so suddenly conceived towards him, would not be conveyed by a more marked demonstration.

After dinner the journey was resumed towards Abbeville, where it was proposed to rest for the night. The sun sank into its western home—and obscurity veiled the road which our travellers were pursuing. Mrs. Ranger got nervous about robbers, upon the chances of an attack from whom she would nevertheless persist in talking—while Julia, already much wearied, dozed by her side. Jocelyn sustained the conversation with the old lady and Emma: but Agatha had gradually ceased to take part in the discourse, and soon became altogether silent.

It was very dark inside the vehicle: and Jocelyn soon experienced a new cause for annoyance. For while he was endeavouring to reason Mrs. Ranger out of her fears, which, whether affected or not, seemed to be augmenting, he felt Agatha's head gently droop upon his shoulder. It was true that she had on a plain travelling-bonnet, so that the silk material alone came in contact with him: but still his extreme sense of propriety made him shrink from anything that appeared to approach an undue familiarity. He nevertheless fancied that she must have fallen asleep, and therefore had unconsciously lain her head upon his shoulder: and as the circumstances of travelling may in such cases somewhat mitigate the strict observances to be followed on ordinary occasions, he made due allowances for the present little incident and offered not to disturb his fair companion.

But in a few minutes he felt her head gradually moving: then it became still again—and then she suddenly, but noiselessly turned in such a way that her cheek rested against his own. He started—but not enough to compel her to shift her position: and then astonished that she did not, he gently drew back, so that while his face no longer touched her own, her head nevertheless remained upon his shoulder. Mrs. Ranger ceased talking at the moment; and he listened attentively to ascertain whether Agatha was sleeping or not. But her breath came not as from the lips of a sleeper: and shocked at an occurrence which he was now forced to regard as a deliberate, intended, and most indiscreet proceeding, if not a positive overture, on her part, he drew still farther aside. Agatha thereupon abruptly raised her head, and gave vent to an ejaculation as if just awaking from a doze.

Jocelyn was now again bewildered, and in deep perplexity what to think. After all, she might have really been sleeping, though he fancied she was not: and, prompted by his generous nature to put the most charitable construction upon the deeds of his fellow-creatures,—unwilling, moreover, to be precipitate or rash in attributing aught savouring of gross indelicacy to a young and gay-hearted girl,—he brought his mind to settle the point in her favour. Still, when he reflected upon all that Mary Owen had told him, his misgivings were again aroused; and the painful conviction was forced upon him that the training to which the unfortunate sisters had been subjected by their unnatural mother, was indeed sufficient to destroy all their moral principles, even if its effect had not as yet been to ruin their chastity.

But while Jocelyn was thus painfully giving way to his meditations, and almost regretting that he had joined the company of the ladies, he soon became sensible of another source of vexation. For be it observed that, in consequence of occupying a place in the carriage between Agatha and Emma, while he was withdrawing himself from the contact of the former he was unconsciously pressing against the latter: then, as he drew more and more away from the eldest sister in the manner already described, his pressure against Emma became all the closer. This circumstance he did not immediately perceive in the confusion of his ideas: but to Emma that pressure appeared full of a tender meaning. She felt his form coming in nearer contact with her own—and a thrill of pleasure shot through her entire frame. But still she stayed perfectly still, in a tantalizing uncertainty as to whether the occurrence were accidental or not. In a few moments the pressure against her grew more apparently decisive—and the wanton blood now coursed like lightning through Emma's veins. Jocelyn's left arm pressed against her bosom, which heaved and swelled to a contact which she believed was intentional: and with a voluptuous ardour she pressed against him in return. At that instant was it that Agatha raised her head and gave vent to an ejaculation as if she were starting from a doze—and then the pressure between Jocelyn and Emma suddenly ceased.

But still the impression remained in Emma's mind that the occurrence which had just taken place, was deliberate and intentional on Jocelyn's part: and she waited a few minutes in the anxious hope that the presumed demonstration of tenderness would be continued. It was not, however—for Agatha was now lounging back in her own corner, and Loftus was no longer inconvenienced for room. Emma therefore gently and gradually pressed towards him,—now pausing for the tacit response so anxiously awaited—then pressing closer still, until the contours of her well-developed bust heaved amorously against his arm. All in a moment

the truth flashed to Jocelyn's mind—once more he started abruptly—and the second temptress as abruptly shrank back into her own corner, complaining of the ruggedness of the road and the jolting of the carriage.

Almost immediately afterwards the vehicle entered Abbeville: and in the bustle occasioned by the examination of the passports at the town-gates—the arrival at the hotel—the handing the ladies out of the carriage—the duty of looking after their luggage and his own—and then the task of giving orders to the waiters, &c.,—in the excitement of these manifold proceedings, we say, Jocelyn for the time lost sight of the previous topic of his unpleasant meditations.

Almost immediately after their arrival at the inn, the ladies withdrew to the chambers prepared for them—and Loftus was equally ready to seek repose. Before he however fell asleep, the behaviour of the two eldest Misses Owen recurred to his memory; and it was while still perplexing himself with arguments for and against a deliberate intention on their part, that slumber visited his eyes.

When the travellers were reunited in the morning at the breakfast table, neither Agatha nor Emma appeared in any way confused on meeting his looks—nor was their behaviour at all changed towards him, unless indeed it were that their tone and manner increased in friendliness. But there was no evidence of humiliated feeling on their part, as if they were conscious of having made overtures which were met with a tacit rebuke.

The journey was resumed,—Mrs. Ranger and the youngest girl occupying the same seat as before, and Jocelyn being again placed between the two eldest sisters, with their backs to the horses. The young gentleman now endeavoured to turn the conversation upon the Princess of Wales,—observing how harshly she had been treated by her royal husband, the Prince Regent—and regretting, if it were only for the sake of their child, the Princess Charlotte, that they did not effect a reconciliation and live together. But he found the three sisters very guarded in their replies and still more sparing in their comments—while Mrs. Ranger, who had passed a bad night, dozed in her corner of the carriage. At length Agatha, with an appearance of natural liveliness and versatility of disposition, exclaimed, "Let us talk of something else—for this is an old and hackneyed topic amongst us:"—and Loftus was accordingly compelled to turn the discourse into another chanel.

He found the three sisters well-informed, accomplished, and intelligent: their good-humour was patent beyond the possibility of affectation;—they did not indulge in scandal, nor frivolous disquisitions on dress—nor were they at all vain of the intimacy which they had enjoyed with the Royal Princes. They possessed many excellent qualities, it was clear: but how far their morals had been depraved and their principles undermined, Jocelyn trembled to conjecture. When, however, he thought of the admirable purposes to which their minds and their dispositions might have been trained under proper tutelage,—and when he reflected that whatever might be their failings and faults, these poor girls could scarcely be held responsible for them,—his heart was moved to the deepest commiseration, and he felt that it would be a glorious triumph to rescue them from the evil influences that were hurrying them on to destruction.

The party stopped to dine at Beauvais in the afternoon—and in the evening at Beaumont, to take an early supper. The journey was then speedily continued: and once more did the shades of night envelop the landscape in obscurity, and plunge the interior of the carriage into almost utter darkness. Jocelyn actually drew himself into as small a compass as possible, so as not to encroach in the slightest degree upon the space allotted to his fair companions on the same seat: but he soon became aware of certain little tacit overtures from either side—a pressure of the knee against his own, or the heaving of a bosom against his shoulder. He felt that his position was alike false and ridiculous: and he became dispirited, and even gloomy. He was surrounded by temptations which he had ample strength of mind and rectitude of principle to resist: and yet he had embarked in an enterprise which compelled him to remain in this very position and subject to these temptations. That the little overtures,—sly, artful, and tacit as they were,—were intentional and deliberate, he could no longer doubt: and it became a question whether he was not compromising himself too far, and entering upon the verge of outrage against the pure love which he felt for Louisa Stanley, by remaining any longer in the company of these syrens whose temperaments were evidently so warm and whose morals were becoming every instant more open to the gravest suspicion.

Finding that they received no encouragement from the young gentleman, Agatha and Emma presently desisted from their tacit approaches and silent demonstrations of tenderness towards him. The discourse grew languid, and soon dropped altogether—every one, save Jocelyn, falling off into a doze. But he himself continued to meditate upon the perplexing situation in which he was placed: and there were but two alternatives for him to choose between. He must either withdraw himself from the company of the syren sisters, and thus break the promise he had pledged to Mary that he would endeavour to rescue them from their present career: or he must remain with them, even at the risk of encountering overtures which pained, insulted, and shocked him. In the former case, he would have nothing more to do than hasten on to Italy and give the necessary warning to the Princess, leaving the three sisters to fulfil their ignoble destiny: in the latter case, he might perhaps find speedy opportunities of conversing with each one alone and separately, and thence judge whether the work of reform were really practicable in reference to them, or whether they were trammelled and ensnared by circumstances and influences beyond all hope of redemption.

Jocelyn decided upon the adoption of the latter alternative of the two which we have named: at all events he determined to see what results the couple of days' sojourn together in Paris would produce.

It was eleven o'clock when the post-chaise entered the French capital: and it proceeded straight to Meurice's Hotel, which was in those times situated in the Rue St. Honoré. Wearied and exhausted with the long journey of two days, Mrs. Ranger and the three sisters lost no time in seeking repose: but ere Jocelyn retired to rest, he sate down and penned

a long letter to his well-beloved Louisa,—for he felt a profound longing thus to commune with the dear one, by committing to paper all the tender things and fond assurances which he would have breathed in her ears had they been together.

CHAPTER LV.

FASHIONABLE DEPRAVITY.

MRS. RANGER and Julia occupied the same sleeping-apartment at the Hotel Meurice; while Agatha and Emma shared another.

The chamber-maid had been ordered to rouse them at nine o'clock in the morning: and accordingly, if we peep about half-an-hour later into the chamber tenanted by the two eldest sisters, we shall find them in the midst of the avocations of the toilette.

"Now what think you of our handsome travelling companion, Mr. Jocelyn Loftus?" inquired Agatha, as she combed out her long brown hair before the immense mirror in which her whole person was reflected, as she stood with naked shoulders and bare bosom in an attitude of indescribable voluptuousness and unstudied grace.

"I think that he is the handsomest young man I ever beheld in all my life," answered Emma, who was lacing on her corset in front of another mirror which reproduced with equal fidelity all the rich contours and fine proportions of her own softly sensuous form.

"But what else do you think of him, Emma?" inquired her eldest sister.

"I scarcely know how to answer you," was the response.

"Should you like to have him as a lover?"

"Yes—but not as a husband."

"And wherefore not as a husband?" inquired Agatha.

"Because I think he is too particular. He seems a very moral young man," returned Emma, laughing.

"Ah! have you been tempting him, then, you wicked girl?" asked Agatha, also smiling roguishly.

"Have you?" demanded Emma. "Come—let us confess. You and I have no secrets from each other."

"I hope not," observed Agatha. "Well, I am bound to admit that the contact of his handsome person did somewhat confuse and bewilder my ideas and excite my passions—and—and—I suffered him to perceive that he was not displeasing to me. In plain terms, I laid my head upon his shoulder—this was in the evening of the first day's journey——"

"And did he reward you with a soft and noiseless kiss?" asked Emma, her bosom heaving visibly in the mirror where it was reflected, and the soft flush of desire tinging her cheeks.

"On the contrary—he seemed either not to understand my meaning, or else to be indifferent," answered Agatha. "Nay—I am not quite sure that he did not positively repulse me—but very gently—and rather by withdrawing himself from me than by pushing me from him."

"Oh! he withdrew, did he?" exclaimed Emma, a light breaking in upon her mind. "Then did I fall into a most egregious error—for as he retreated from you, he pressed against me, and I fancied that the pressure was intentional."

"And you returned it?" said Agatha, in a voice full of deep sensuousness—for the bare idea of these amorous overtures heated her blood and inflamed her imagination, so that the carnation deepened upon her cheeks—her hazel eyes swam in liquid languor—and her fine bust swelled and sank like the undulating motion of the sea.

"I returned that pressure—in fact, I gave Jocelyn Loftus to understand precisely what you did," said Emma, in response to her sister's question. "I let him know as plainly as I dared that if he were bold and venturous, I should not prove timid nor cruel."

"And the result?" exclaimed Agatha, hastily.

"The same as in your case," was the reply.

"Last evening, in the carriage, I renewed my little artifices," observed Agatha; "and with an equal futility. When we descended from the carriage and entered the room where the lights were blazing, I scarcely dared look him in the face: but I was resolved not to seem humiliated——"

"That was precisely the feeling which I experienced," exclaimed Emma. "But do you think that Jocelyn is a perfect anchorite—or that he rejects our overtures because he is smitten with Julia?"

"I scarcely know what to think," responded Agatha. "But I do not fancy that he is inclined to pay any particular attention to Julia: and as for a young man of two or three and twenty years being an anchorite, is not the most probable theory to fall back upon. He may possess very lofty notions of honour——"

"He evidently does possess them," observed Emma.

"And is therefore loath to engage in an intrigue with young ladies who are to a certain extent under his protection," added the eldest sister.

"Very likely. Or else he is afraid of that old harridan Ranger," suggested Emma.

"Far from it," exclaimed Agatha. "He experiences for her the most sovereign contempt, although he endeavours to conceal it. But I have marked the curl of his beautifully chiselled lip—Oh! what classic lips——"

"And such a faultless Grecian face, with that clear rich brown complexion," observed Emma. "His hair, too, is magnificent—dark as jet and as glossy as a woman's. Then his teeth—your's and mine are not whiter nor more even——"

"And that is paying ourselves a compliment at the same time," said Agatha, laughing so as to display the rows of pearl which shone between her red and juicy lips. "But did you ever behold such splendid eyes as Jocelyn's? Ah! when I think of that fat, puffy, bloated Prince, and then fix my thoughts upon Jocelyn, it seems as if I had submitted to the pawings of a great imp and now vainly sigh for the embraces of an Apollo!"

"Nor can I reflect lovingly upon the Duke of York's image," said Emma, "when that of Jocelyn is uppermost in my mind. I wonder whether Julia is smitten by him—and whether she thinks of her Duke of Cumberland in constrast with our handsome fellow-traveller. And yet," exclaimed Emma, suddenly laughing gaily and turning towards Agatha, "it is not every trio of sisters who have had three Princes as their lovers——"

"And paramours," added the eldest girl: then, with a subdued sigh, she observed in a tone that altered strangely all in a moment, "Do you know, Emma, I am very much afraid——"

"Oh! I can guess what you are about to say!" exclaimed Emma, with a subdued shriek and look of dismay. "Heavens! is it possible?"

"I am afraid so," replied Agatha, mournfully. "But do not speak so loud—do not give vent to ejaculations: we may be overheard! And when I think of it, don't mention it to Julia: for should my fears prove correct, the fewer confidants the better."

"How in the name of heaven will you manage, my dear girl?" inquired Emma, still contemplating her sister with mingled anguish and dismay.

"Oh! if it be really the case, I can conceal the fact for a long time to come," answered Agatha: "and then I must trust to circumstances to point out the means of avoiding eventual discovery. It is not so difficult on the Continent as it is in England to manage these matters: midwives are more accomplished in France and Italy—and also more knowing and less scrupulous," she added, with a significant look.

"I understand you," observed Emma. "But——"

"Do not let us talk any more about it now, my love," said Agatha, suddenly brightening up. "If the worst comes to the worst, the Prince Regent must support his child—for his it assuredly will be. You know, Emma, that I have never as yet yielded to the embrace of any other——"

"And the Prince must know it likewise," was the response. "For my part, I should be fearfully shocked and alarmed if I thought that my amour with the Duke of York was likely to bring me into disgrace."

"And yet you are ready to plunge headlong into an amour with Jocelyn Loftus," exclaimed Agatha, laughing—for the natural gaiety of her disposition soon returned.

"Ah! but he is so very handsome!" murmured Emma, with a deep sigh of mingled pleasure and ardent longing. "It is however quite clear that we cannot both win him to our arms—to one only must the triumph and the happiness belong——"

"Let me have a fair opportunity of plying him with the artillery of my fascinations," said Agatha: "and if I discover that his heart is proof, I will abandon him to your seductive wiles."

"Agreed!" exclaimed Emma. "And after all—even supposing that you should be in the way to become a mother—it is much better to make up one's mind to lead a life of pleasure and gaiety, especially as we cannot hope to make very excellent marriages: for our reputation has been assuredly damaged by our intimacy with the Princes."

"And therefore," added the eldest sister, with the coolness of settled depravity, "if we have the character of being no better than we should be, let us also have the enjoyment."

"Upon that point, Agatha," observed Emma, "you and I have already agreed; otherwise we should not be discoursing so confidentially, so unreservedly, and so frankly as we are doing now. But to return to the handsome Jocelyn—what opportunity do you require? and how can I succour you?"

"Contrive to get Mrs. Ranger and Julia to accompany you shopping this afternoon, if possible," replied Agatha: "and I will remain in-doors with Jocelyn. He will not offer to escort you if you expressly say you are going out shopping."

"Leave it to me," said Emma. "I suppose that after breakfast we shall all sally forth in company to see *the lions*: then we shall return to luncheon——"

"And afterwards I shall feel too tired to go out again before dinner," observed Agatha. "As for Mrs. Ranger, I am very certain that instead of standing in the way of an intrigue, she would wink at it—especially if a few guineas were slipped into her hands. Oh! I have fathomed that woman's character far more deeply than our mother has done."

"But mamma is very credulous in some things," observed Emma,—"although so very astute and cunning in others. The idea of throwing us constantly in the way of the Princes, and expecting that we should pass with impunity through the fiery furnace!"

"It was most preposterous!" exclaimed Agatha. "But here is Julia."

"What! not dressed yet?" cried this young lady, as she entered the room. "I have been up for the last hour—and should have come to chat with you, if that dreadful old creature, Mrs. Ranger, had not kept me to help her put herself together. I never knew such a painted sepulchre as she is—such a made-up specimen of self-modernised antiquity. But, by the bye, I have not until now had an opportunity of asking you both what you think of our travelling-companion?"

"That is the very subject we have been discussing for the last hour, Julia," replied Agatha. "We both consider him uncommonly handsome, agreeable, and fascinating. Indeed, for myself, I infinitely prefer him to the Prince of Wales—Emma likes him much better than the Duke of York——"

"And I now regard the Duke of Cumberland as a perfect ourang-outang of ugliness in comparison with this Adonis of a Jocelyn," observed Julia, with a gentle sigh.

"Has he exhibited any tenderness towards you?" inquired Agatha.

"Not the least!" she answered, in surprise at the question. "What made you think so?"

"Because he has rejected certain little overtures which Emma and I have made towards him," responded the eldest sister: "and therefore we fancied that he must either have experienced a preference for you, or else must be proof against our witcheries altogether."

"What! a handsome young man feel no passion!" exclaimed Julia: "and three pretty girls unable to thaw the ice of his heart! It's too absurd."

"So we think," rejoined Agatha; "and therefore we are going to lay siege to him in our turns. I first—Emma second—and you third, Julia, if we fail."

"Be it so," said the youngest of the three sisters.

And after this delectable conversation, they descended to the sitting-room, where Jocelyn was already seated, deep in the perusal of a French newspaper. Mrs. Ranger shortly made her appearance; and during the repast the plans of the day were settled. It was arranged that immediately after breakfast they should all proceed together to visit some of the principal buildings—that they should return to luncheon at three—that in the afternoon those who had purchases to make should go out shopping—and that in the evening the whole party should visit some theatre.

Jocelyn had been in Paris before—as had also Mrs. Ranger: they were consequently well able to conduct the young ladies to all the most remarkable sights in the French metropolis—and a few hours were thus passed agreeably enough. They returned to Meurice's shortly after three o'clock: and during lunch-time Emma inquired who proposed to accompany her on a visit to the milliners', jewellers', and other fashionable repositories. Mrs. Ranger was of course indispensable to such a tour, which required her knowledge of Paris—and Julia was prompt in giving an affirmative answer. But Agatha, pleading a slight head-ache, expressed her intention of remaining in-doors until the evening: and Jocelyn said not a word. He was however well pleased at thus finding an opportunity of discoursing alone with one of the sisters.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia went up to dress again; and Agatha inquired gaily whether Mr. Loftus meant to stay and keep her company. He replied that he proposed to do himself that honour: and Agatha turned suddenly away to conceal the flush of mingled joy and sensuous anticipation which she felt burning upon her cheeks. Observing that she must leave him for a few minutes, in order to help her sister Emma at the afternoon's toilette, she hurried from the apartment.

"Jocelyn will remain with me," she said, in a tone of triumph, as she entered the chamber to which Emma had preceded her. "And now, then, let me make the most of the charms which heaven has given me."

She selected a dress which, without being too fine or in any way gaudy, was of surpassing elegance;

and being made after the most approved fashion of the day, it was cut so low in the body as to leave the shoulders entirely bare and reveal so much of the bust that the imagination had but little trouble in filling up the remainder of the glowing picture. She was not above the middle height, though a little taller than Emma: but there was more dignity in her gait than in that of her sister—and the statuesque carriage of her neck and shoulders gave her bosom, naturally fine, the grandest development. This she knew full well: and hence her selection of a dress which displayed her charms to the most voluptuous advantage. But she threw over her shoulders a gauze kerchief—thus flimsily veiling the beauties which, with all the accomplished artifices of coquetry, she really intended to be seen.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia sallied forth together; and Agatha returned to the sitting-room, where Jocelyn had remained. The moment she made her appearance in that seductive manner, her aim and object flashed to the mind of Loftus; and, though his looks betrayed not his sentiments, he inwardly experienced a mingled pain and disgust at this too brazen evidence of a deep depravity. For an instant he was inclined to abandon the self-imposed task of reforming the three sisters as utterly hopeless; but then the feeling of pity for their unhappy destiny returned to his soul—and, likewise remembering his pledge to Mary, he resolved to prosecute an undertaking which was nevertheless accompanied by so many incidents that shocked his upright character and wounded his generous heart.

Throwing herself with a voluptuous negligence upon a sofa, she darted a look all vibrating with desire upon Jocelyn Loftus, who, taking a chair near her, paid no attention to the studied but apparently involuntary display of charms and fascinations the artillery of which was now directed against him.

"Miss Owen," he said, in a calm but serious voice, and without looking at her, "I purposely sought the opportunity of this interview."

"Indeed!" she murmured, her heart suddenly beating with transport at what she instantaneously took as an avowal, and which seemed at the moment to promise her a far more easy victory than she had expected: and the colour came and went in rapid transitions upon her very beautiful countenance.

"I have behaved with some little duplicity towards you," continued Loftus, still keeping his eyes averted: "but the moment for serious explanation is now come."

"And why should they be so serious?" asked the young lady, in a low and tremulous tone the tenderness of which at once struck Jocelyn and convinced him that his prefatory remark had been entirely mistaken.

For suddenly turning his eyes, in mingled amazement, pity, and pain, upon Agatha, he saw that the kerchief had fallen away from her shoulders, and that she was leaning towards him with all the nude display of her luxuriant charms and with a profound wantonness in her looks.

"Miss Owen," he at once exclaimed, turning aside with an impatience almost amounting to disgust,—"let us understand each other. It is purely and simply upon a matter of business that I propose to address you; and the explanations I have to give are of a very serious character, I can assure you."

"But I am in no humour for serious discourse, Mr. Loftus," said Agatha, in a tone of vexation: and as the blood rushed to her cheeks, she bit her lip nervously.

"When I tell you, Miss Owen, that I am acquainted with your sister Mary," observed Jocelyn, "you will perhaps condescend to listen to me."

"Ah!" ejaculated the young lady: and, the keenest interest being suddenly excited in her mind, she mechanically drew the kerchief over her shoulders, as if abandoning, at least for the moment, her wanton designs upon Loftus.

"Yes—I have seen Miss Mary Owen," he continued: "and she has told me all—everything! It was by no accident that I fell in your way at Calais, and that I became your travelling companion to Paris. I purposely sought the opportunity to form your acquaintance, in the hope of being enabled to point out to yourself and your two sisters the lasting dishonour that will attach itself to your name if you persevere in the course where the most fatal influences have placed you. For if you regard the matter in its true light, you will perceive—you cannot fail to understand, indeed," he added emphatically, "that you are taking part in a shocking conspiracy to ruin the peace and destroy the character of a lady who never injured you. I allude to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales!"

"Heavens! that little traitress, Mary, has indeed betrayed us!" cried Agatha, now seriously alarmed, and totally losing sight of all the sensuous thoughts which a few minutes before were uppermost in her imagination. "But where is she, Mr. Loftus?—how came you to fall in with her?"

"The day after she quitted you at Woolwich, Miss Owen, did I encounter your unhappy sister in the streets of London: and you may rest assured that she is not only in a place of safety, but also in honourable companionship. I am comparatively a stranger to you," added Jocelyn, with some little significancy: "but I leave you to determine whether from the first moment of our acquaintance the day before yesterday, you have seen aught in me that would warrant a suspicion against my principles and my honour. I am young," he continued,—"perhaps too young to undertake a portion of the task which I have imposed upon myself, and which is the awakening of yourself and your sisters to a sense of the enormity of that service wherein you are embarked. But I cannot think—no—I dare not entertain so vile an opinion of human nature, as to suppose that you will designedly, deliberately, and systematically undertake the ruin of a Princess who has already suffered so much. I beseech—I implore you, Miss Owen, to weigh the matter well—to pause—to reflect—to decide on the score of justice, honour, and humanity. You have not yet compromised yourself too deeply to withdraw from this atrocious service. Pardon me for using harsh terms and strong language: but my indignation will not permit me to speak in a milder tone."

"What do you advise—what do you wish, Mr. Loftus?" asked Agatha, nervously excited and scarcely knowing what she said.

"If you would abandon the service in which you have embarked," exclaimed the young man, enthusiastically, "I would love you as a sister!"

"Ah! that is but after all a cold expression," murmured Agatha, with a tone and look of reviv

ing tenderness. "There are perhaps terms on which I might listen to you—there is a language you might adopt that would prove irresistible——"

"Oh! do not talk to me thus, Miss Owen!" exclaimed Loftus: and as he turned his eyes reproachfully upon her, he observed that her own were swimming in a soft sensuous languor and that she was again performing the part of a syren-temptress. "I will not affect to misunderstand you, because it will only be prolonging a topic that is unfit for us both. Know, then, that I love and am betrothed to a young lady whose image is never absent from my mind,—a being endowed with every virtue, and the purity of whose soul shall never be outraged nor shocked by any word or deed on my part."

"You are the most admirable preacher I ever heard out of a pulpit, Mr. Loftus," said Agatha, in a voice of bitter irony: but instantaneously recovering her wonted good-humour, she observed, "If you fancy that I hoped to inveigle you into a marriage with me, you are much deceived. But you spoke of loving me as a sister——"

"I meant that if you would adopt a course worthy of a high-spirited and humane woman," interrupted Loftus, "I should experience that admiration—should feel that friendship——"

"Which would doubtless be eminently flattering to me," added the young lady, in a tone of good-tempered sarcasm. "But if I give you no satisfactory assurance on that point?" she said inquiringly.

"Then I shall have no alternative but to hasten on to Italy and warn her Royal Highness of the perils and the treacheries which are closing in around her."

"You would not go to this extreme, Mr. Loftus?" exclaimed Agatha, now more terrified than ever.

"It would be made compulsory on my part by your perseverance in an unjust and dishonourable course," responded the young gentleman. "In any case I am determined to seek an interview with her Royal Highness: but I should feel well pleased not to be compelled to make any mention of the name of Owen."

"But if my two sisters and I were to pledge ourselves to observe a discreet, forbearing, and honourable conduct towards the Princess?" exclaimed Agatha, interrogatively.

"Even on those terms, you could not accept situations about her person with honour to yourselves," answered Jocelyn.

"Ah! you mean to say that you would not believe us," cried Agatha, her countenance becoming crimson. "But how can we retreat? Would you have us return to England and tell our mother that we have thrown up these high situations and renounced all these brilliant prospects? It is for you to pause and reflect, Mr. Loftus. What would become of us? Our mother's door would be closed against us: the public would fancy that something injurious to our characters had been suddenly discovered, and that our appointments as ladies-in-waiting to the Princess had been cancelled. Ruin—utter ruin—irremediable ruin would overtake us," exclaimed Agatha in a voice of despair.

"A more fatal destruction will entomb you, body and soul, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn Loftus, with deep solemnity, "if you persist in becoming the instruments of a vile conspiracy. Besides, think you that the Princess of Wales will receive you into her establishment, if forewarned against you?"

"Will you make war upon three young ladies who have not injured you, sir?" demanded Agatha, with a mixture of indignation and reproach.

"Shall I suffer war to be made by three young ladies against a Princess who not only has never injured them, but whom so many high personages in England are leagued together to ruin?"—and as Jocelyn thus spoke, he fixed his gaze earnestly upon Agatha Owen, that the seriousness of his looks might confirm the decisiveness of his language.

"Oh! if my mother were here to counsel us!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears: and the bosom that ere now glowed with sensuous transports and palpitated with the longings of desire, was convulsed with sobs.

"It is a most painful thing for any one to speak ill of a mother to the ears of her daughters," said Jocelyn: "but you must be aware, Miss Owen, that she who should have proved your best friend, has been your greatest enemy—and fortunate will it be for you, perhaps, that your mother is not now here to influence your decision."

"And if my sisters and I renounce the service in which we are engaged," said Agatha, when the first convulsion of grief had passed, "what course are we to pursue?—whither shall we go?"

"Return to England—seek your mother—and tell her the whole truth," replied Loftus. "Say that you had no alternative but to come back to her, inasmuch as I was so resolute—so sternly resolute—in declaring that if you did not, I would warn the Princess against you."

"But I must consult my sisters—I must also consult with Mrs. Ranger," observed Agatha: "and this blow has fallen so suddenly—so unexpectedly——"

"Take as much time as you think fit, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn: "and in the interval I will keep aloof from you—I will even remove my quarters to another hotel——"

"No—that would excite suspicions and create scandal here," interrupted Agatha hastily: for, notwithstanding the hostile and dictatorial attitude which Loftus had assumed, she did not wish to part from him.

"I will do nothing to increase your present annoyance," he responded. "If you can still regard me in a friendly light, after all that has just occurred, I shall cheerfully remain in your company. Indeed, I shall consider your desire for me to do so as an evidence of improved feeling on your part, and a proof that you understand and appreciate the sentiments by which my conduct is actuated. I shall now leave you, Miss Owen, for the present: and at six o'clock, I shall have the pleasure of rejoining you at the dinner-table, when I hope that no frowns or black looks will await me on the part of any one."

Having thus spoken, Jocelyn rose from his seat—bowed—and quitted the apartment, leaving Agatha a prey to all the conflicting and unenviable feelings which her own disappointed sensuality and the young man's decisive conduct had so deeply aroused in her bosom.

Mrs. Ranger, Emma, and Julia shortly after-

wards returned; and the intelligence which Agatha at once imparted, struck them with consternation. They were amazed—terrified—bewildered. But Mrs. Ranger, who in an emergency was prompt at laying aside the airs of an old coquette and looking matters deliberately in the face, soon recovered her presence of mind: and, consulting her watch, she said, "It is now five o'clock: we dine at six—and there is one hour before us. In that hour much may be done."

"But what can we do?" inquired the three sisters, as if in the same breath.

"If we persist in continuing our journey to join the Princess," proceeded Agatha, "Jocelyn Loftus will hasten on in advance and poison the mind of her Royal Highness, so that we shall be dismissed in ignominy when we seek her presence: and to abandon the enterprise without a struggle, would be to compel our return in equal ignominy to London."

"Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger, fixing her eyes with a peculiar but unmistakable meaning upon the eldest girl, "were there no means by which you could have silenced this moralizing babbler? Ah! if I were of your age and possessed such sweet lips as yours, they should have been employed as a seal to set upon his mouth."

"He is beyond temptation," replied Agatha, the blood rushing to her cheeks and suffusing its crimson glow on her neck and shoulders, down to the very hemispheres of her bosoms.

"Ah! I understand," said Mrs. Ranger, now observing the luxurious exposure of Agatha's charms and comprehending the motive. "We must adopt another course. Sit down at once and pen a few lines to your mother—tell her what has happened—demand her immediate counsel—and say that we shall remain in Paris for her instructions. I will in the meantime go myself and arrange with the proprietor of the hotel for a courier to become the bearer of the letter, as we cannot wait the delays of the ordinary post."

"But Jocelyn must not know that we are despatching a courier to London," observed Agatha. "At least, it would be better that he should not——"

"Leave the affair in my hands—and lose not a moment in penning your letter," said the old Hecate of iniquity. "In half-an-hour it must be ready."

She then left the apartment.

"And so Jocelyn was proof against your witcheries?" exclaimed Emma and Julia, the instant the door closed behind Mrs. Ranger.

"His heart is of stone to *us*," was the emphatic response: "but he loves another. For my part, I have done with him—at least I think so—and yet he is so agreeable as a companion, that I should be sorry to lose him altogether from us."

"Well, my turn is now come to lay siege to him," cried Emma, her looks glowing with the animation of hope.

Agatha now began to write the letter to her mother: and in about twenty minutes it was concluded. Mrs. Ranger soon afterwards made her appearance, followed by a French courier, ready booted and spurred: the despatch was delivered to him—and he instantaneously took his departure.

At six o'clock the dinner was served up—and Jocelyn made his appearance. Mrs. Ranger and the girls were less cheerful than hitherto: but there was no alteration in the friendly tone of their manner towards himself. Indeed, a glass of champagne presently restored them all to something near their wonted liveliness;—and after dinner Jocelyn escorted them to the theatre. They returned to the hotel at about eleven o'clock, and sought their chambers.

The following day—(this was Wednesday, and the same on which Venetia and Sackville were married in London)—was passed in visiting the various exhibitions and public buildings that remained to be seen. Not a word was spoken relative to the all-important matter then pending: but Jocelyn remarked that Agatha did not seem so anxious as before to keep near him when they were walking, or sit next to him in the carriage which was hired for the excursion;—whereas it was now Emma who monopolised his arm and engrossed to herself all the attentions which the rules of courtesy compelled him to display.

The next day (Thursday) was passed in a similar manner,—still nothing more being said about the important topic of Jocelyn's discourse with Agatha—and Emma still constituting herself the monopolist of his attentions. The ladies all seemed to be a trifle less cheerful than at first: and it was therefore evident that the affair had made some impression upon them. But why they took so much time to arrive at a decision, Loftus could not imagine. If he were however at a loss on this point, he had no difficulty in observing that Emma was assailing his heart with a thousand little seductive wiles and insidious fascinations: but he seemed to take no notice thereof—and he assuredly gave her no encouragement.

This same Thursday brought letters from England—some for the Misses Owen; and others for Jocelyn. The former, written by the young ladies' mother, made them acquainted with the burglary which had taken place on the preceding Sunday at Richmond, and the death of the footman. The correspondence for Loftus was from his beloved Louisa, who gave him the fondest and tenderest assurances of her unalterable attachment. Before Jocelyn retired to bed that Thursday night, he read Louisa's letters over and over again, and sate up late to pen her a long epistle in reply. He stated frankly that he was still in company with Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen—that he had broken the ice with regard to the object of his visit to the continent—and that he hoped to succeed in inducing Mary's sisters to abandon their nefarious enterprise of their own accord, without compelling him to expose them to the Princess of Wales.

The following day (Friday) was passed in the same manner as the two preceding days; and Saturday was slipping by in a similar way, when Jocelyn thought it high time to express his hope to Agatha that a decision would be promptly announced to him. He accordingly found an opportunity of mentioning the subject apart to her;—and she at once assured him that on the morrow he should receive a final answer. A suspicion which he had already conceived, to the effect that the ladies were awaiting instructions from England, now became strengthened in his mind: and he frankly stated his thoughts to Agatha. But with an appearance of the most ingenuous sincerity,

she vowed that the delay was caused solely by the difficulty of coming to a decision on the point: and she added that the morrow being Sunday, they had resolved to devote the morning to an earnest deliberation on the course which was to be pursued. Jocelyn was satisfied to wait four-and-twenty hours longer;—and no more was said upon the subject this day.

Having visited a theatre in the evening, the party returned to the hotel at about eleven o'clock, as usual; and soon afterwards they sought their respective chambers. But when Jocelyn entered his own apartment, he found a note lying upon the toilette-table: and on examining the address, he perceived that it was in a beautiful female handwriting.

For a few moments he hesitated to break the seal, suspecting that it was a communication from one of the young ladies: but considering, on a second thought, that indiscretion and indelicacy could scarcely be carried so far, he opened the letter. His charitable conclusion was however doomed to disappointment; for the contents of the note ran as follow:—

"It is absolutely necessary that Agatha and I should have a few minutes' conversation with you alone, and as soon as possible. I am altogether of opinion that my sisters and myself should retire from the false and painful position in which the influence and intrigues of others have placed us: and for my own part I am resolved to follow the excellent advice which you so generously, disinterestedly, and kindly gave Agatha. In a word, I shall resign my appointment as lady-in-waiting to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. Agatha is also inclined to adopt the same course: but Julia cannot be persuaded to fall into the same view—and Mrs. Ranger is perversely bent in opposing it. This lady watches us narrowly, in order to prevent any private conversation with you upon the subject. To-morrow, immediately after breakfast, we are to hold a consultation; and a decision will be arrived at. But it is absolutely necessary that Agatha and myself should have the benefit of further counsel from your lips before this consultation. Will you, then, have the kindness to meet us to-morrow morning at eight o'clock in the Champs Elysées?

"EMMA OWEN."

"It may be written in full honesty and sincerity," said Loftus to himself, as he contemplated the note which he had just perused: "but still I have my misgivings. Nevertheless, I will not prejudge the writer, but will keep the appointment."

CHAPTER LVI.

ANOTHER PHASE OF FASHIONABLE DEPRAVITY.

CLEAR, bright, and beautiful was the Sunday morning, as Jocelyn Loftus issued from the Hotel Meurice and bent his way to the shady avenues of the Champs Elysées. This beautiful resort was not above ten minutes' walk from the hotel;—and on reaching the central avenue, Jocelyn was almost instantaneously joined by Emma Owen.

"Where is your sister?" he inquired, with a somewhat serious air: for on finding that she was alone, his misgivings of the preceding night returned with double force to his breast.

"She was so long in dressing that I feared to be late," responded Emma, with an air of frank sincerity: "and as we breakfast at nine, you know, there was not a minute to spare."

"We will at once, then, proceed to the object of our interview," said Jocelyn, offering his arm to the young lady, and leading her gently along the avenue.

We must here pause to observe that on the Sunday morning, in those times as well as at the present day, large numbers of the working-classes were in the habit of proceeding early to the villages in the suburbs of Paris to pass the day in dancing, rambling in the woods, water-excursions, pic-nics, and other innocent recreations. There was scarcely a Sunday without a *ducasse*, or fair, in one of these suburban villages: and the Champs Elysées were always sure to be thronged in the morning with the pleasure seekers repairing to the scenes of their amusement. Such was the case on the present occasion: and it was evidently impossible to pursue a serious and uninterrupted discourse in the central road of the Champs Elysées. Jocelyn was therefore compelled to conduct his fair companion into one of the less frequented paths; and indeed they soon found themselves entirely alone in a secluded avenue of trees.

Emma was elegantly dressed, and looked truly beautiful. The morning air and the inward fluttering of her feelings heightened the colour upon her cheeks and appeared to enhance the lustre of her eyes. Few men could have been stoical enough to resist the artillery of such charms: but Jocelyn loved his absent Louisa with the purest, holiest, and most fervid passion—and such a love is an armour of proof for him who experiences it.

"I have read your note with much attention, Miss Owen, and with unfeigned pleasure," he began, determined to take her at her word precisely as she had expressed herself in her communication. "You have resolved to resign your appointment—your eldest sister is prepared, you tell me, to adopt a similar course—but Miss Julia cannot so easily abandon a post which she doubtless considers to be invested with brilliancy and honour. Mrs. Ranger is obstinately opposed to the course I have pointed out: and she perhaps exercises considerable influence over Miss Julia's mind. Is this the actual position of the affair?"

"It is," replied Emma: then, gazing up fondly in Jocelyn's face, she said in a low and tremulous tone, "It was a fatal day, Mr. Loftus, when you first resolved upon your present enterprise, however generous and even chivalric may have been your motive."

"What do you mean, Miss Owen?" he demanded, surveying her in astonishment.

"I mean, Mr. Loftus—and I implore you to hear me with attention," she cried, grasping his arm firmly with her elegantly-gloved hand, as if she were fearful that he would escape her,—"I mean that you have deprived me of my peace of mind—of all my hopes of happiness in this world! You have extirpated one idea from my soul—but you have implanted another there, which is indelible. You have destroyed the dream of grandeur which I had pictured to myself in connexion with my appointment to the little Court of her Royal Highness: and you have left in the place of that golden vision the image of yourself. Oh! start not—attempt not to withdraw your arm—you *must* and you *shall* hear me!" she exclaimed, with a wild

energy. "For I am not the mistress of my own feelings—I cannot control my own actions. I have conceived for you a passion that is in itself a frenzy——"

"Miss Owen, I dare hear no more!" said Jocelyn, resolutely and almost sternly. "Let it suffice for you to learn and for me to declare that I love another——"

"Ah! wretch that I am!" she cried, with a faint shriek: "I cannot endure to live! By all that is sacred I swear——"

"Take no rash vow—calm yourself—tranquillise your feelings!" exclaimed Jocelyn, cruelly embarrassed by this scene, and deeply, deeply regretting he had kept the appointment: but more than half suspecting that her frenzied manner was only feigned, he said, "Remember how indiscreet—how unlady-like—how unmaidenly it is on your part, thus to address a young man who is almost a stranger to you."

"A stranger!" cried Emma hysterically, as she clung with force to his arm. "No—no: I am as well acquainted with you as if I had known you all my life. Your's are qualities so resplendent that they take one by surprise, and seize as it were upon the very heart. You must not blame me for what I have done—for what I am doing. Why did you throw yourself in my way?—why did you seek our companionship in this journey? It was not I who sought you in the first instance. Had you been a stranger passing me in the street, and if I had accosted you, you would have been justified in spurning me from your presence: but it was far different. You introduced yourself, as it were, to me—you shone upon me in all the glory of your beautiful person and your brilliant mind—and you snatched away my heart. It was not taken slowly and insidiously—it was ravished all in a moment. And can I help this love—this immeasurable love—with which you have inspired me?—is it my fault that I have succumbed to the magic of that voice and those looks the influence of which has been shed upon me? And you—cruel that you are—you reproach me for telling you that state of mind into which you yourself have plunged me!"

Then, apparently exhausted by this torrent of words which she had poured out with passionate vehemence, Emma Owen sank upon a bench and gave way to a flood of equally violent weeping.

Jocelyn threw a rapid glance around; and it was some relief to his immense perplexity to be assured that no observer was nigh. Indeed, he was most cruelly bewildered. The ardour of the young lady's language—her impassioned manner—her wild looks—and then her apparently deep anguish, all staggered him. Himself too little versed in the treacheries and hypocrisies, the feints and the artifices, of which the human mind is capable, he could not believe that this scene was all duplicity—all a studied tragedy—from the beginning up to the present stage. And yet he could not bring himself to fancy it entirely genuine and real. Thus, tormented by uncertainty—fearful of proving harsh on the one hand, and recoiling from the idea of being made a dupe on the other—he dared not withhold commiseration, and he dared not proffer it.

"Miss Owen," he said, in a voice that was serious without being severe, and in a manner that was reserved without being harsh, "I must beg and implore that you permit me at once to escort you back to the hotel. There is a duty which you owe to yourself—there is a duty which you owe to me as a fellow-creature. That is, to control your feelings, to whatever extent they may be excited——"

"Oh! this is maddening—maddening!" exclaimed Emma, clasping her hands as if in despair. "How can you preach patience, calmness, and duty to one who is goaded to frenzy? You say that you love another. Well—I seek not to interfere with the happiness of that being whom you have blessed with this enviable love. You have a whole life to devote to her: can you, then, refuse me one single day—one single hour of love—since you have stolen away my heart? Ah! it is a dreadful confession to make—and I feel the tingling of shame from the crown of my head to my very feet: but this confession must be made all the same! And it is that I love you with a madness of passion—with a frenzy that will prove my death: and that madness—that frenzy must be appeased. Surely no woman ever loved so wildly, so intensely, and so enthusiastically before! My doom, then, is in your hands: give me one day—one single day—of that blessed love of thine—and I shall sustain myself on the memory thereof for the rest of my life! Nay—I shall even be happy—contented—rejoiced: and I shall treasure up the recollection of that one day's consummated bliss, as the only gem that my soul covets. But refuse me, Jocelyn—refuse me," she said, the exaltation of her voice and manner suddenly sinking into lowness and gloom,—"refuse me, I say—and the waters of the Seine are deep——"

"Heavens! what madness is this?" cried Loftus, his perplexity now rising into the cruellest alarm. "I have listened to you too long, Miss Owen—and you have said too much."

"Farewell, then—farewell for ever!" she suddenly exclaimed: and springing from the seat, she sped along the avenue with the fleetness of the hunted deer, towards the bank of the river Seine which flowed hard by.

"Good God! she is serious—it is no artifice!" thought Jocelyn: and, wild with terror, he bounded after her, overtaking her near the end of the avenue.

She sank exhausted in his arms: and as he bore her to one of the numerous benches scattered about, he saw that her eyes were closing as if she were going to faint, although the deep hues of overwrought excitement remained upon her cheeks.

Placing himself upon the seat, which was a mere common bench without any back to lean against, he was compelled to support her in his arms: and once more did he look up and down the avenue, in the fear of being observed. But no person was approaching, nor even visible from that spot: and, somewhat relieved by this circumstance, he again bent his looks upon the countenance of the young lady.

"Ah! it were sweet to die thus," she murmured softly, as she opened her eyes and gazed up into his countenance with ineffable tenderness. "But wherefore did you pursue me—why did you hold me back, when in another minute there would have been an end to the woes, the anguish, and the despair which you have implanted in my bosom?"

"Let us not renew the conversation now, Miss Owen," said Jocelyn, gently raising her recumbent form. "You have afflicted me sadly—you

have terrified me profoundly—and I must insist that we return at once to the hotel."

"You will subject me, then, to the matchless humiliation of having besought an hour of your love, and experiencing a refusal?" murmured Emma, bending down her hazel eyes, upon the lashes of which the tear-drops trembled—while the blush of shame was now upon her cheeks, and her bosom was convulsed with sobs.

"I scarcely think you comprehend the purport of your own words, Miss Owen," said Loftus, emphatically: "and I hope to God that you do not. Very, very painful would it be for me to imagine——"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in another paroxysm of frenzied exaltation: "you must imagine the truth—and of that truth I am not ashamed. For you have filled my heart with a passion which is consuming me: and all my happiness—my very life indeed—is staked upon the hope of appeasing it Revile—scorn—loath—abhor me as you will,—denounce me as unmaidenly—proscribe me as a disgrace to my sex,—but still you cannot alter the condition of my heart. And surely when a fond, a loving, and a devoted woman offers to abandon herself to you, not only as a proof of that illimitable worship—that frenzied adoration,—but also that she herself may have the recollection of that hour of love and bliss to compensate her for the loss of thee thereafter and enable her to sustain the weight of the future years of her existence,—surely, I say, you will not spurn her altogether!"

Thus speaking, Emma fixed her fond and earnest regards in profound entreaty upon Jocelyn Loftus, who, shocked at the dreadful depravity which was enveloped in such softly insidious language, could not prevent his looks from betraying the disgust that filled his soul.

"Take my arm, madam," he said, in a stern and imperious tone, as he rose from the bench. "It is time we should hasten homeward."

"No—I will not move until I have your response," exclaimed Emma, passionately.

"Then hear it, whatever be the consequences," rejoined Loftus. "Your wiles—your arts—your fascinations are wasted upon me: I would sooner perish than prove unfaithful to her who possesses my love. Come, Miss Owen—I insist upon our immediate departure hence."

Humiliated—baffled—disappointed—and almost crushed with the overpowering sense of shame, Emma saw that her seductive arts were indeed thrown away upon this well-principled young man: and mechanically taking his arm, she suffered him to lead her from the secluded avenue where the extraordinary scene just recorded had taken place.

Not a word was now spoken between them: nor did Emma dare even to risk a furtive glance at his countenance, for fear he should observe that she thus regarded him. But there was in the depths of her soul the intuitive conviction that his looks were full of the expression of outraged feeling: and depraved as she was in heart, she nevertheless deplored her folly in risking so consummate a humiliation. She was also racked by the torture of unappeasable desires: for although her conduct towards Jocelyn had commenced in artifice and duplicity, it had nevertheless acquired a certain amount of sincerity from the inspiration of her licentious passions. Thus the ardour of her language was not altogether feigned: but it was created by the heart's own incendiarism of feelings, and not by the purer flame of love.

In silence did they regain the hotel; and the moment they entered the passage leading to the sitting-room, Jocelyn stopped short.

"Miss Owen," he said, "I shall not betray to a living soul the particulars of the interview which has taken place between us. I will not add to your humiliation by publishing your shame. If your absence has been observed, I leave you to give what explanations you choose. But I must decline the honour of henceforth joining your party at table or elsewhere. If your sisters and yourself have any communication to make relative to the important subject which I need only thus allude to, it can be done in writing. But if I hear nothing from you in the course of this day, I shall to-morrow morning continue my journey—but *alone*—towards Italy: and her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales will be duly prepared to receive the spies whom her unprincipled husband has appointed to attend upon her."

Having thus spoken, Jocelyn Loftus bowed coldly and turned away: and Emma, who had listened with flushing cheeks, downcast eyes, and trembling form, hastened up to her own chamber to give vent to her agitated feelings in a flood of tears.

On thus leaving the young lady, Jocelyn issued from the passage and passed into the court-yard of the hotel, for the purpose of seeking the coffee-room where he intended to take his breakfast. But he was accosted by an elderly, sour-looking Frenchman, plainly though by no means shabbily dressed, and the first glance of whose eyes seemed intended to pierce Loftus through and through.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he began, politely raising his hat; "but I wish to have a word or two with you on business of importance."

"We will inquire for a private room," said Jocelyn, not much liking the man's appearance or mode of address, and having a vague and undefined suspicion of some impending treachery.

"It is not worth while, sir," was the response. "In fact, I may as well inform you at once that I am a police-agent—and those persons," he added glancing over his shoulder towards two individuals, also in plain clothes, who were lounging under the gate-way, "are my comrades. You will have the goodness, sir, to accompany me to the Prefecture of Police."

"For what purpose?—and upon what charge?" demanded Loftus, indignantly.

"Merely to give the Prefect some little explanations, sir," replied the police-agent. "I dare say it will be all right: but you *must* come away at once."

"Allow me to visit my chamber for a moment," said Loftus, "in order to fetch some papers and documents that I may require, to prove my respectability, if that be the point on which the Prefect demands information."

"Your papers are already in my possession, sir," returned the police-agent, drily.

"What! you have dared violate the privacy of my writing-desk?" exclaimed Jocelyn, more indignantly than at first.

"I had my authority, sir," was the cold and laconic rejoinder.

Jocelyn paused for a few moments: but well aware that the French police possessed extraordinary powers, and reflecting how useless it would be to defy them, he said, "I will accompany you."

The agent again raised his hat politely, and followed Loftus from the court-yard of the hotel. On emerging into the street, they entered a hackney-coach that was ready waiting at a little distance; and the officer made a sign to his two men that they need not follow into the vehicle, as they were about to do.

The hackney-coach rolled away along the Rue St. Honoré; and during its progress to the head-quarters of the police, Jocelyn endeavoured to glean from his companion a more special idea of the cause of the present proceeding. But the agent was so guarded in his replies that the young gentleman was left as much in the dark as he was before he put his queries—though, perhaps, his own conjectures furnished him with some faint glimmering of the real truth.

In twenty-minutes the hackney-coach turned into the dark and gloomy gateway of the Prefecture; and Jocelyn was immediately conducted by the police-agent into the presence of an old gentleman, who was seated at a desk in a handsomely-furnished apartment. This functionary was the Prefect of Police.

"Be seated," he said in a courteous tone: and Jocelyn, as he took a chair, began to imagine that there was no treachery in contemplation after all.

Meantime the police-agent had quitted the apartment: but returning in a few moments, he handed the Prefect a document which Jocelyn instantaneously recognised as his own passport, and which he had delivered to the landlord of the hotel, according to custom, on his arrival in Paris.

"You know this paper?" said the Prefect, displaying it before Jocelyn's eyes.

"I do. It is my passport," he replied.

"But it is made out in a false name, sir," remarked the Prefect. "You do not deny this allegation?"

"I do not deny it," rejoined the young gentleman: "but I will at once, and, I am sure, in the most satisfactory manner explain to your Excellency the reasons——"

"I ask no explanations, sir," interrupted the Prefect, more curtly and severely than before. "With your motives I have nothing to do: the fact, which you deny not, is sufficient for me. It is my painful duty to detain you in custody for the present. You will have the goodness to accompany the officer——"

"But, your Excellency, this outrage——"

"Silence, sir!" ejaculated the Prefect, now speaking with unmitigated sternness.

"No, I will not remain silent!" exclaimed Loftus, his countenance glowing with indignation. "As a British subject, I shall demand the protection of my country's Ambassador——"

But the Prefect cut short the young gentleman's words by abruptly quitting the apartment: and the police-agent, tapping him upon the shoulder, said, "Have the goodness to follow me, sir."

Loftus, perceiving that it was useless to remonstrate with a subordinate who was obeying the commands of a superior, accompanied him from the room, and was conducted along a dark passage to a small ill-furnished chamber, the windows of which were defended with massive iron bars.

The door was then closed upon him: and as the grating sound of the key turning in the lock, and of the huge bolts shooting into their sockets, met his ears, he thought of his absent and well-beloved Louisa—and his heart sank within him!

CHAPTER LVII.

THE REUNION OF THE PARTY OF SIX.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the marriage of Horace Sackville and Venetia Trelawney; and in the evening of the 10th of October—(for, after Byron's example, we like to be particular in dates)—all was bustle and activity at the house of Colonel Malpas in Great Marlborough Street.

The dining-room was brilliantly lighted: the table was laid for six persons;—the side-board exhibited a splendid dessert in crystal dishes—and the culinary process below-stairs gave promise of a luxurious banquet.

At about a quarter to six o'clock Colonel Malpas, dressed in full evening costume, descended from his chamber and cast an approving eye over the arrangements in the dining-room. Everything was to his perfect satisfaction: and his butler received due acknowledgments for the taste displayed in the preliminary details of the entertainment.

"It does you infinite credit, Plumpstead," said the Colonel: "very great credit indeed. By the bye, how much am I indebted to you, my good fellow?"

"Only two years and a half's wages, at forty guineas a-year, sir," was the response: but though Mr. Plumpstead courteously introduced the word *only*, it must by no means be fancied that he was well pleased at the existence of these long arrears.

"Ah! that's a hundred guineas, Plumpstead," said the Colonel. "Well—I shall settle with you to-morrow—you may rely upon it."

"I hope you will not forget it, sir," replied the butler, with a low bow: then, as his master left the room, he muttered to himself, "The cheating scoundrel! I don't believe I shall ever see the colour of my money. I can take my oath something queer's going to happen—for I am certain that fellow was a sheriff's-officer who called this morning to ask if the Colonel was in town. And by the bye, I forgot to tell master of it: but no matter. To-morrow will be time enough."

Thus mused Mr. Plumpstead, the butler,—while the Colonel ascended the well-lighted staircase to the drawing-room. There he surveyed himself from head to foot in one of the handsome mirrors: and as he caressed his moustache, he complacently observed, "Well, I certainly am good-looking enough to win the favours of even such a transcendent beauty as Venetia Trelawney."

But still the Colonel was not altogether easy in his mind. To speak more plainly still, he was restless, nervous, and agitated. It was true that he had succeeded in persuading his wife to pay a visit for the occasion to her plebeian relatives in the City—for be it remembered that he had married the daughter of a retired butcher:—and he had also managed to get the money to provide the sumptuous banquet about to take place. But the satisfaction arising from these achievements was more than counterbalanced by the desperate hazards and risks he was about to run, and into which his desperate circumstances had impelled him. In fact, he was knave enough to concoct any villany; but he was somewhat deficient in the courage necessary to carry it out. Therefore, the nearer the hour approached for executing the scheme on which he was bent, the more nervous did he become.

In addition to this, Emmerson had compelled him to sign a note of hand, payable on demand, for the amount of the forged bills. This note was given on the morning after the scene with Lady Curzon at Mrs. Gale's: thus a fortnight had elapsed—and the note was still unpaid. Two or three days previous to the evening of which we are now writing, Malpas received an urgent and indeed threatening letter from Mr. Emmerson: but he had written to put the bill-broker off with a solemn assurance to liquidate the whole sum in the course of the week. His only hope of paying the amount existed in the result of the scheme which he had now in hand, and in furtherance of which the banquet was to be given;—and if this scheme should fail, utter ruin would stare him in the face, with the concomitant alternatives of flight to the continent or a debtor's gaol.

Such was the position wherein Colonel Malpas was placed: and the reader requires not to be assured that it was far from an enviable one. Indeed, that self-sufficient survey of his person in the mirror and that complacent caressing of the moustache, were only the sickly attempt of an agitated mind to persuade itself that it was not so restless as it really was, in the same way that a guilty person who trembles at every knock at the door, endeavours to tranquillise his fears by constantly saying, "After all, it is impossible I can be found out." Thus do men, in difficult and danger-

ous circumstances, invariably strive to reason themselves out of their most settled convictions, and persuade themselves that the feelings which torture them are really not felt at all!

But to return to the thread of our story.

Precisely at six o'clock, a carriage dashed up to the Colonel's house—and in a few moments the footman flung open the drawing-room door, announcing in a loud voice, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon!"

The Colonel hastened forward to receive him: and as they shook hands, the baronet said, with a gay laugh, "Well, upon my word, Malpas, I was never more surprised in all my life than when I received your note of invitation to this banquet."

"Is there anything so very remarkable in my having company?" observed the Colonel, affecting a happy and good-humoured smile. "Methinks," he continued, with his wonted drawing-room drawl, "this is not the first time I shall have had the pleasure of entertaining you, Huntingdon: and I am sure I hope it will not be the last."

"And so do I," exclaimed the baronet, flinging himself upon a seat. "But your note enjoined me to lay aside any other engagement I might have formed, inasmuch as this banquet was in pursuance of the agreement entered into a month ago at Leveson House. What, then, could I imagine, but that after all you have been the successful candidate for the favours of the lovely Venetia?"

"Well, you shall see presently," observed Malpas, assuming a pleasant look of mingled significancy and triumph. "All in good time, you know: the banquet first—and business afterwards."

"But how on earth could Sackville have married her?" exclaimed the baronet, evidently bewildered by the various thoughts that were agitating conflictingly in his mind. "Of course he did not know that she had already been won by you: and, if he comes to-night, I should think the scene will be rather a painful, or at all events an extraordinary one. He will have to be told to his face that he married a woman who, with all her enchanting beauty, was no better than she should be——"

At this moment the door was again thrown open—and the Earl of Curzon was announced.

"My dear Malpas," he exclaimed, "is it a fact?—or is it a hoax? It is assuredly no delusion that you purpose to give us a banquet—for the dining-room door stood open as I passed through the hall; and to clear up the misgivings which had haunted me ever since I received your note a few days back, I peeped in and saw covers laid for six. Pardon this impertinence on my part—but I really could not help thus gratifying my curiosity and appeasing my suspense."

"Well, I have been as much astonished as yourself, Curzon," said Sir Douglas Huntingdon, while the Colonel endeavoured to look good-humouredly knowing and complacently mysterious. "But I was observing to Malpas just as you came in, what an ass Sackville has either made of himself or else will be made to appear to-night——"

"I don't think he will come," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "In fact, he can not: he would never dare show his face amongst us. He will be too much ashamed of himself, and will never stand all the bantering he must expect for being so egregiously duped. For my part, I think Venetia is a deuced deal worse than he must even suspect after receiving Malpas's note——But, by the bye, did you send him one?" asked the nobleman, turning towards the Colonel.

"To be sure I did," was the response. "Was I not bound to do so in accordance with the agreement made at Leveson House?"

"As a matter of course," observed Huntingdon. "But what do you mean, Curzon," he inquired, evidently struck by something the nobleman had said, "when you state that Venetia is worse than her husband can even suspect her to be after receiving Malpas's note of invitation?"

"I mean," replied the Earl, "that I am very much mistaken if——"

But he stopped short as the door was again thrown open and the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance.

Malpas hastened to welcome the old debauchee, who, after shaking hands with Curzon and Sir Douglas, drew the Colonel aside, saying, "I'm really afraid this will turn out an unpleasant business."

"How do you mean?" inquired Malpas, a cold terror seizing upon him.

"Because it must produce a quarrel between you and Sackville."

"No such thing. If he were fool enough to be gulled into a marriage with a woman who had previously surrendered herself to me——"

"There is some force in your argument," interrupted Lord Leveson: "but let us look well at the matter so as to anticipate, if possible, any dispute with Sackville, which might give publicity to the thing——"

"Oh! for his own sake, he will not let the world know what a fool he has been," said the Colonel, evidently anxious to escape from the colloquy into which the Marquis was drawing him.

"At all events let us talk it over, Malpas," persisted the nobleman: and leading him still further towards the extremity of the spacious drawing-room, he proceeded to argue upon the necessity of caution—but evidently with the more interested object of extracting from the Colonel all the particulars relative to his presumed triumph over Venetia.

Meanwhile Sir Douglas Huntingdon had drawn the Earl of Curzon aside to the other extremity of the drawing-room: and looking him earnestly in the face, he said, "What was the observation you were about to make when Leveson arrived?"

"Well, I hardly know whether I ought to give utterance to my suspicions," returned the Earl, in a musing tone: "but in confidence between you and me, I have every reason to believe that Venetia abandoned herself to the Marquis of Leveson and the Prince of Wales——"

"And I have entertained precisely the same suspicions," interrupted the baronet.

"The devil you have!" said the Earl in surprise. "But how on earth——"

"I know what you are going to say," remarked the baronet, with a smile of peculiar meaning: "and may I not also inquire how on earth *you* came to glean *your* information on those points? Come—let us be candid with each other.

"Willingly," said the Earl. "In plain terms, then, I bribed Tash and his man Robin to watch Venetia——"

"So did I," responded the baronet.

"Well! this is excellent!" remarked Curzon. "And they informed you that Venetia went to Leveson House and Carlton Palace on the same night?"

"Precisely so," returned the baronet. "But they also gave me a version of Malpas's interview with Venetia in Lady Wenlock's grounds at Kew, which does not very well tally with his boasted triumph over her."

"And they gave me a similarly puzzling account of that interview," rejoined Curzon. "In fact, it is this that has so much perplexed me. I do not know what to think. Either Tash or Malpas must lie most tremendously."

"The affair is curiously involved," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon; "and its details are intricate to a degree. Malpas never would be fool and scoundrel enough——'

"I have no very exalted opinion of him," said the Earl: "and you must remember there are six thousand guineas at stake. Leveson is treasurer: and we will not allow him to part with the money unless Malpas can give us the most positive and undeniable proofs that he really succeeded in being the first to win the favours of Venetia. What induces me to fancy that he might have done so, is that Venetia evidently abandoned herself to Leveson and the Prince—on the same evening too: and therefore she is thoroughly depraved."

"But why should she have rejected you and me?" asked the baronet. "At all events, if money be her object, you could have given her as much as Malpas: and if good looks be concerned, I may add, without flattery, that you ought to have stood a better chance than he."

At this moment the door was thrown open; and the domestic announced his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

Malpas, instantaneously quitting Lord Leveson, advanced to meet the Prince, who shook hands with him as cordially as ever, despite the angry declaration which he had made to Venetia, the night of her visit to Carlton Palace, to the effect that the Colonel was a sneaking scoundrel and would do well never to show himself in his royal presence again. Thus was it, however, that the royal presence was now vouchsafed at the Colonel's dwelling, notwithstanding the menace alluded to.

After exchanging a few words with Malpas on ordinary topics, and without the slightest mention of Venetia's name, the Prince Regent suddenly turned towards Leveson, saying, "By the bye, my dear Marquis, I have a few words to whisper in your ear, —on a political matter: and I hope Malpas will excuse my rudeness in taking you aside."

"Your Royal Highness is the master here as elsewhere," said the Colonel: and, caressing his moustache, he proceeded to join the Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

The Prince took Leveson's arm and lounged with him towards the end of the room: then, in a low tone, he said, "What the devil is the meaning of all this?"

"I cannot understand it," responded the Marquis. "It seems tolerably clear that Malpas has achieved a triumph: and I believe it, because when Venetia came to my house she told me that the Colonel had made her acquainted with all the particulars of the love-campaign."

"She told me precisely the same thing," observed the Prince: "but she spoke of Malpas at the time in terms of contempt and disgust."

"That may have been an artifice," said Lord Leveson. "Malpas assures me he shall produce the most undeniable evidence of his success: but what the evidence is he would not explain at present. Venetia must be as deceptive and designing as she is beautiful."

"I really begin to think so," observed the Prince. "It was my intention to cut Malpas for ever: but when I received his note of invitation to this banquet, and understood the meaning it implied, I was positively astounded. I therefore resolved to suspend my opinion altogether until the events of this evening should have transpired. But I am seriously afraid that Sackville has made a great fool of himself, and is inveigled into a match with an unprincipled adventuress—most probably head and ears in debt, and only anxious to get a husband in order to throw the burthen of her liabilities upon his shoulders and thus save herself from prison."

"It looks uncommonly like it," observed the Marquis.

"By the bye, any news of the gossamer lady?" asked the Prince with a smile.

"None, sir," responded the nobleman, his looks becoming clouded all in a moment: but instantaneously recovering his composure, he said, "Does your Royal Highness know whether Mr. and Mrs. Sackville have returned to town?"

"I do not," answered the Prince. "But perhaps Malpas can tell us:"—then advancing towards the centre of the room, he said, "Colonel, do you know whether the Sackvilles have returned from Brighton?"

"They came back last night, sir," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon; "and proceeded to Acacia Cottage."

"You had that information from our friend Tash," whispered the baronet hurriedly. "He sent Robin to me late last night with the same intelligence."

"Do you think Sackville will join our party?" inquired the Prince.

"I have received no answer to my invitation," said the Colonel.

"For my part, I do not think he will make his appearance," observed the Earl of Curzon.

"Nor I," added Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "He must be heartily ashamed of himself, no doubt."

"And would not like to face us—eh?" said the Marquis of Leveson.

"He fears, perhaps, a terrible bantering," observed the Prince Regent.

"It is now half-past six," said the Colonel, consulting his watch: "and that is the time named in the note of invitation. Shall I order dinner to be served up?"

But ere the Prince, to whom the question was put, had time to answer, the door was again thrown open—and the servant announced Mr. Horace Sackville.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE BANQUET.

VENETIA'S husband advanced into the room with the easy assurance and calm self-possession of

good breeding, and as if there were nothing peculiar either in his own position or in the circumstances of the present occasion. Having paid his respects to Colonel Malpas, who could very well have dispensed with his company, Horace turned towards the Prince: and his Royal Highness shook him with all his wonted cordiality by the hand. The Marquis of Leveson and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were equally warm in their greetings: whereas the Earl of Curzon was not only somewhat cold and distant, but likewise suffered a partial sneer to curl his lips as he spoke. Sackville did not however seem to notice this manifestation of ill-feeling: but, turning again towards the others, he proceeded to discourse, without constraint or embarrassment, upon the principal topics of the day.

In a few minutes the domestic announced that dinner was served; and the party repaired to the banquetting-room.

The repast was of the most succulent description, fully equalling that of which the same company had partaken at Lord Leveson's. The wines were of the first quality; and the dessert was not less commendable to the tastes of the convivialists. During the banquet not a word was spoken in reference to the object of the meeting—and not an allusion made to it. But the discourse was sustained, as if by common consent, on a variety of other subjects. Nevertheless, everybody *did* in his heart feel that unless these efforts were made to support the conversation uninterruptedly, the damp of constraint would speedily fall upon their spirits. As for Colonel Malpas, he drank large quantities of wine in order to keep up an artificial gaiety: but the nearer the moment arrived for the grand act in the drama, the more nervous and apprehensive did he in reality become.

At length the cloth was drawn—the dessert was placed upon the table—and the domestics retired.

It was now about eight o'clock in the evening: and Mr. Plumpstead, the butler, opening the front door, looked up and down Great Marlborough Street, by the light of the lamps. In a few minutes three persons descended from a private carriage at a little distance; and, having directed that the vehicle should wait for their return, they hurried to the door at which the butler was standing.

These three persons were Venetia, Captain Tash, and his man Robin.

The lady was elegantly dressed and looked enchantingly beautiful, as if she had even derived a more brilliant loveliness from matrimony. Captain Tash was in full evening costume, with dress coat, white waistcoat and cravat, and kid gloves: his aspect was uncommonly fierce, as usual—but blended therewith, was an air of supreme importance. As for Robin, he was decently attired: but the purple robes of Napoleon could not have imparted dignity to his shambling gait and sneaking looks.

"Hush!" said the butler, putting his finger to his lips in a knowing manner, the instant Venetia and her two companions ascended the steps: "it is all right. Mr. Sackville has told me of your coming—and he's a real gentleman. *He* wouldn't owe two years and a half's wages to a poor butler, I'll be bound."

Having somewhat relieved his feelings by this indirect cut at his master, Mr. Plumpstead admitted Venetia, Captain Tash, and Robin into the house, gently closing the front-door.

"Now, ma'am, what can I do for you next?" he inquired of Venetia. "Mr. Sackville has done what's right towards me——"

"He has proposed to take you into his service?" said Venetia.

"He has, ma'am: and therefore I already regard you as my missus."

"Can you manage to leave the dining-room door a little ajar," inquired Venetia, "so that I may overhear what takes place within?"

"Certainly, ma'am," responded Plumpstead. "Be so good as to remain here quite quiet: there's no fear of any one coming out of the dining-room—and if any of the other servants should see you in the hall, they won't say a word. I've given them a hint upon the subject."

Thus speaking, Plumpstead cast a glance upon the hall-table in search of some object which should furnish a pretext for entering the dining-room; and taking up a crystal jug, filled with water, he threw his napkin half round it in the true butler-fashion, and carried it in. As he placed it upon the table, Colonel Malpas said, "You need not come in any more until I ring."

"Very good, sir," replied Plumpstead: and he paused for a few instants to open a large screen and draw it round the door, apparently to keep out the draught, but in reality to hide the door itself.

Then, issuing from the room, he caused the door to sound as if it were being shut—whereas he left it ajar. Captain Tash, Venetia, and Robin were thus enabled to overhear in the hall whatever took place in the dining-room.

The critical moment had now arrived for Colonel Malpas to carry out the daring scheme which he had concocted: and when it became evident that he was about to rise and speak, the looks of his guests were fixed upon him with an expression of intense interest.

Tossing off a bumper of Port, he rose and said, "May it please your Royal Highness, and you, my lords and gentlemen, it would ill become me to act as chairman or president at a meeting in which I am about to perform a somewhat prominent part. I therefore suggest that our esteemed treasurer, the Marquis of Leveson, shall preside over our proceedings."

"A very excellent suggestion," observed the Prince Regent. "Of course you all agree. Good! Come, take the chair, Leveson."

Colonel Malpas accordingly resigned his seat at the head of the table to the Marquis, and took the one which this nobleman had hitherto occupied next to the Prince Regent.

"Now," said Lord Leveson, as he drew forth his pocket-book and counted down six Bank-notes, each for a thousand pounds,—afterwards placing a purse full of gold upon them,—"here are the six thousand guineas which I have held as treasurer, and which I am prepared to pay into the hands of the fortunate individual who shall prove his right and title to the same, according to the terms of our compact. But I must observe, as your chairman, that I hope our proceedings will be conducted with the utmost good-humour, and that each and all will preserve a calm temper, no matter what may transpire."

"A bumper to ratify that most judicious sentiment!" exclaimed the dissipated Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"And now," resumed the Marquis of Leveson, when the glasses had been filled and emptied, "it becomes my painful duty to ask our young and esteemed friend Mr. Sackville, whether, as the husband of the lady whose name will have to be mentioned presently, and whose image is doubtless in all our minds, he has any remark to make ere our proceedings continue any farther?"

"For the moment I have only a suggestion to offer," replied Horace, speaking in a firm tone: "which is, that your lorship shall take the names in the order they issued from the ballot, and each shall answer *yea* or *nay*, as explanatory of the result of his suit in respect to the lady alluded to."

"Be it so," said the Marquis of Leveson: "and I think the suggestion is a good one. According to the ballot, the names stood in the following order:—

Monday—The Earl of Curzon.
Tuesday—Sir Douglas Huntingdon.
Wednesday—Colonel Malpas.
Thursday—The Prince Regent.
Friday—The Marquis of Leveson.
Saturday—Mr. Sackville.

According, then, to this category, I call upon the Earl of Curzon to speak first."

"I am bound to admit, frankly and candidly," replied this nobleman, "that I experienced no success in the matter alluded to."

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon!" exclaimed the Marof Leveson.

"With equal frankness and candour, I declare that I was as unsuccessful as Lord Curzon," answered the baronet.

"Colonel Malpas!" exclaimed the Marquis.

"My lord," said that individual, rising from his chair, and speaking in a voice which borrowed its calmness from desperation; "I am bound, however painful the announcement may be to any friend present,—and seeing the peculiar nature of the circumstances which were initiated in an after-dinner frolic, I hope there will be no loss of friendship on this account,—I am bound, I say, to declare that the result of my campaign made me for the time being the happiest of men."

Having thus spoken, the Colonel resumed his chair and immediately tossed off a bumper of wine.

"Let the names be called to the end of the list," said Horace Sackville, whose face was white as a sheet, but whose voice was nevertheless marked by a firm decision.

"Be it so," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson. "The Prince Regent!"

"On my honour, as a man and a gentleman—setting aside my rank for the present," returned his Royal Highness, "I cannot boast of having been blest with the favours of the lady alluded to."

The Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon exchanged rapid looks, expressive of surprise at this announcement, the truth of which they could not doubt: they therefore both fell back upon the belief that Captain Tash must have deceived them in his representation of Venetia's visit to Carlton House.

"My own name stands next upon the list," said the Marquis of Leveson, "and my explanation is precisely the same as that already given by his Royal Highness:"—then, after a moment's pause, he observed with a half-smile, "Mr. Sackville, am I to call upon you?"

"Most assuredly," returned Horace, his cheeks now slightly flushing, and his voice remaining imperturbably calm. "I wooed Venetia—and I won her. She is my wife. But if Colonel Malpas can prove that previously to our wedding-day, he succeeded in obtaining the favours of her whom I have thus made my wife, I cannot possibly, under the very peculiar circumstances of the case, be offended with him. Seeing, however, that so far as I am concerned, a love-campaign which commenced as an after-dinner frolic, has terminated in the most serious and solemn manner for myself—namely, in marriage,—I hope that Colonel Malpas will not stand forward to blast the reputation of my wife without having irrefragable evidence to produce in support of his assertion: and I likewise hope that you, whom I now address, will not consider that the preseut scene is nothing more than another act in that same after-dinner farce, but that you will treat the matter with all the solemnity and seriousness that should characterise a jury of honourable men."

There was a tone of deep feeling in this speech which produced a visible effect upon all present: and the Earl of Curzon, now that his heart was somewhat warmed by the generous wine, was the very first to exclaim, "By heaven, Sackville, you shall have fair play!" This sentiment was echoed by the Prince Regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon: while Malpas, whose heart was sinking within his breast, tossed off two or three glasses of wine in rapid succession.

But still sustained to a considerable degree by the courage which often arises from the desperation of a neck-or-nothing position, he rose from his seat amidst a profound silence, and spoke as follows:—

"Far be it from me to make a declaration of so serious and solemn a nature as that which I have put forth, without being enabled to substantiate it. Hitherto we have all of us been apt to deal lightly enough with the reputation of women; and we should doubtless have continued to do so in the present instance, were it not that the lady in question has recently married one of our party, and that the husband himself is present. I will make no lengthy comment upon what I may term the imprudence, if not the actual indelicacy, of Mr. Sackville appearing amongst us under existing circumstances: but I cannot help adding that whatever statements he may now hear to shock his feelings, he himself to some extent courts the feelings they are thus calculated to excite."

He paused for a few instants: and those who glanced furtively at Horace Sackville, saw that he was evidently labouring under the influence of emotions which he had some little trouble to restrain. His cheeks had a hectic flush, like that of fever, upon them—his eyes were fixed, but unnaturally bright—and his lips were firmly compressed. His whole appearance indicated the inevitable bursting forth of a terrific storm: it was the volcano as yet sleeping, but surrounded by the fever-heat that preludes an explosion.

"I will now proceed to my proofs," resumed Malpas, who alone mistook Sackville's ominous looks and guarded silence for the evidences of a crushed and broken spirit. "You are aware that my day for the love-campaign was a Wednesday.

On the previous day I chanced to call upon Lady Wenlock at Kew; and in the course of conversation her ladyship mentioned that the most celebrated beauty of the day, Miss Venetia Trelawney (as her name then was, previously to her marriage), was to be at the horticultural fête announced by her ladyship for the ensuing evening. Having already received an invitation, I resolved to be there. On the Wednesday morning I met Mr. Sackville by accident, and told him I should be at the fête, in order to avail myself thereof to procure an introduction to Miss Trelawney. Mr. Sackville must remember the circumstance."

"Perfectly," said Horace, in a cold but untrembling voice.

"I did repair to that festival," continued the Colonel: "and I obtained the wished-for introduction to Miss Trelawney, as she then was. I need not enter into particulars: suffice it to say that we walked together in a secluded avenue, allowing the ladies who accompanied her—Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot, I believe—to proceed a considerable distance a-head. My suit, which I pleaded passionately, was successful: and Miss Trelawney gave me an appointment for the ensuing Friday evening, at a place which I named."

"Friday evening!" ejaculated the Marquis of Leveson, exchanging a rapid but meaning glance with the Prince of Wales.

"Yes—the Friday evening," returned Malpas: "and consequently before Mr. Sackville's marriage with the lady, which marriage took place on the ensuing Wednesday. One more word will suffice: Miss Trelawney met me on the Friday evening alluded to at the house of Mrs. Gale in Soho Square——"

"At what o'clock?' inquired the Marquis of Leveson.

"At nine o'clock," responded Malpas.

"And how long did she remain with you at Mrs. Gale's?" asked Lord Leveson, with another rapid, but now astonished look at the Prince Regent. "Let us have all the circumstances stated in detail and accurately recorded," he observed, making notes in his pocket-book.

"Miss Trelawney remained with me at Mrs. Gale's from nine until past eleven on that Friday evening," returned Colonel Malpas.

"But the proof of this?" said the Marquis, inquiringly.

"Here is Mrs. Gale's own certificate of the fact," answered the Colonel, tossing a folded paper towards the Marquis. "I have no more to say:"—and he resumed his seat.

The Marquis of Leveson opened the paper; and the astonishment he already felt, was enhanced when he recognised Mrs. Gale's handwriting, which was perfectly familiar to him. He had expected to find the document a forgery: but there was no doubt it was genuine, although the circumstances detailed in it might not be true for all that.

"Yes—this is Mrs. Gale's handwriting," he said: "I know and can attest it."

He then read the paper, which set forth that Colonel Malpas and Miss Venetia Trelawney (now Mrs. Sackville) had passed two hours together at her establishment, between nine and eleven o'clock, on the night of Friday, September 20th, 1814.

Malpas now felt assured that his triumph was complete: for Horace Sackville still remained silent and motionless, with the fever spots burning upon his cheeks and his lips quivering.

The Marquis and the Prince once more exchanged looks of ineffable astonishment, as if uncertain what course to pursue, and yet having it in their power to make some startling revelations: while the Earl of Curzon whispered hurriedly to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, "You see how that rascal Tash deceived us both!"

But all on a sudden, the door was thrown open with such violence that the screen was nearly upset;—and Venetia herself, followed by Captain Tash, entered the room. Robin was not however with them: he had been hastily despatched on some errand, the nature of which will speedily transpire.

Nothing could exceed the grandeur of Venetia's beauty at this moment. Her splendid form was drawn up to the full of its noble height—and, as her carriage now seemed statuesque as that of a sculptured Juno, by her shoulders being thrown back and her head being held erect, her superb bust displayed its ample development to the fullest advantage. Upheaved in its luxuriant proportions, it seemed ready to burst through the drapery that outlined its swelling contours: while the glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, dilating nostrils, and lips apart, threw the spell of an almost Olympian majesty upon her transcending charms.

Every one present, save Sackville, started from his seat as the beauteous lady and her formidable-looking companion made their appearance: while Horace himself rose gently and leisurely, his features now illumined with the radiance of approaching triumph. As for Colonel Malpas, guilt and cowardice were as legibly depicted upon his ashy cheeks and in his affrighted looks, as ever the words themselves were printed on the page of a volume.

"Your Royal Highness—my lords—gentlemen," said Venetia, in a tone which, though firm, was filled with all the flute-like harmony of her soul-seeking voice,—"you have listened to the tale of accusation: now do me the justice to hear the defence."

"Most assuredly!" exclaimed the Prince Regent. "My lord," he added, turning towards Leveson, "whatever disappointment *you* may have experienced relative to this lady, justice must be done her. You are the chairman of the meeting—and I know you will do your duty."

"Beyond all doubt," said the Marquis, who was so dazzled and overpowered by the enchanting loveliness and Juno-like majesty of Venetia's appearance, that he forgot all the resentment excited by the scene which had occurred at his own house—he no longer remembered the incidents of the treacherous chair—but he felt suddenly inclined to do anything or everything on behalf of that woman of superhuman charms. "Let us all be seated," he exclaimed. "Horace, hand your wife a chair—and Captain Tash——"

But the gallant officer had already dropped into a seat and was stretching forth his hand to grasp the nearest decanter, before the Marquis had time to utter another syllable. The Captain likewise drew towards him three or four dishes of cakes and fruits: and as he began to eat and drink with as much coolness and absence of restraint as if the house were his own, he said, "Go on, my lord: I can always hear best when profitably employed."

Malpas made a last effort to assume an air of confidence: and by way of conciliating the formidable Captain, whom he knew to be his enemy, but whose presence on this occasion he could not account for, he said, "Make yourself at home, and don't spare the wine."

"Mrs. Sackville," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, "we are ready to hear you."

"It will be sufficient for me, my lord," answered Venetia, "simply but emphatically to deny the calumnious aspersion thrown upon me by Colonel Malpas. My husband is the proper person to conduct my defence."

"First of all, then," said Horace Sackville, "I shall request Captain Tash to state whatever he knows of the interview between Colonel Malpas and my wife at Lady Wenlock's."

"With much pleasure," observed the gallant officer, filling a tumbler with Port wine and draining it at a draught—for he contemptuously eschewed the paltry size of an ordinary wine-glass. "On the particular Wednesday night alluded to by Colonel Malpas,—for I must tell you that I have been listening outside the door to everything he has been saying,—myself and my man Robin, who is a faithful creature, were concealed amongst the bushes in Lady Wenlock's grounds. Why we were there, doesn't matter," he continued, darting a sly look at Lord Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon: "it is enough to state that we *were* there. It is true that Mrs. Arbuthnot and her daughter walked on in advance: but it is also true that Mrs. Sackville, as the then Miss Trelawney now is, treated the Colonel with mingled scorn, contempt, raillery, and defiance, according to the variations of language which he adopted towards her. He hinted at some conspiracy that was set on foot against her, and declared that his own most intimate friends were engaged in it. He informed her that she was the object of a wager on the part of some base and infamous voluptuaries. Those were

his very words. He heard a rustling in the evergreens, and was startled. Ah! he little thought that Rolando Tash," added the Captain, with a look of terrible ferocity upon the pale, trembling, and speechless Colonel, "was concealed in the evergreens, like —like—an owl in an ivy-bush."

Here the gallant officer paused, and tossed off another tumbler of Port wine.

"Well, my lord," he continued, addressing himself to the Marquis, "the Colonel proceeded to threaten Miss Trelawney—Mrs. Sackville, I mean—in a frightful manner. My hair, though well oiled and curling naturally, stood on end. He told her that unless she yielded to his wishes, he would persecute her by all manner of means—destroy her reputation—whisper to one and breathe in the ears of another that she was his mistress—aye, and even forge letters with her name appended, to prove his tale. He gave her two weeks to deliberate——"

"Enough, Captain Tash," said Lord Leveson. "I think," he added, glancing round the table, "that we need not allow Mrs. Sackville's ears to be offended with a further recapitulation of these atrocities."

"Certainly not," exclaimed the Prince Regent, red with indignation. "Sit down, Tash, like a good fellow—and drink your wine."

"Here's a bumper, then, to your Royal Highness," said the Captain, refilling his tumbler and tossing off the contents. "And inasmuch as my Lord Marquis is an excellent chairman, I drink a bumper to him also,"—suiting the action to the word. "And forasmuch as we have a beautiful lady present, I drink a bumper to her health in particular and that of the sex in general—for I don't know what the devil we should do without them:"—then, having drained the tumbler and refilling it, he observed, "But it would be bad manners on my part not to drink to the other lords and gentlemen present——"

How long Captain Tash would have gone on with his succession of bumpers and healths, it is difficult to say: but he was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of Robin, leading in Mrs. Gale of Soho Square.

A half-stifled groan now burst from the lips of Colonel Malpas, who saw that no chance remained for him, but that every available incident had been pressed into the service of his opponents. Discomfited—crushed—almost annihilated, he sate ghastly and trembling in his chair, unable to speak a word —a wretched, wretched example of mingled guilt, cowardice, and despair.

Mrs. Gale was evidently much frightened at being brought into the presence of this formidable conclave: and Robin whispered to Captain Tash that if he had not menaced her with a constable, she would not have come at all. She now confessed, after some hesitation, and with many prayers for pardon, that she had been induced to draw up and sign the certificate, which was dictated by Colonel Malpas, on condition of receiving the immediate payment of a sum of money owing to her by him. She added that the certificate was not drawn up on the day specified by the date, but some days later: and she admitted that Mrs. Sackville had never visited her establishment at all. She was then permitted to retire.

But scarcely had she left the room, when the footman entered to inform Colonel Malpas that he was wanted for a moment on very particular business.

"You must come back immediately, sir," exclaimed the Marquis of Leveson, sternly.

The Colonel murmured a faint "Yes," and hastily quitted the room in a state of mind not even enviable by a person about to be hanged.

On stepping into the hall, he was confronted by two individuals whose looks proclaimed their errand. One was a person of the Hebrew nation, with a cut-away coat, knee-breeches, and top-boots. He wore a spotted neckerchief with an enormous pin—a bunch of gold seals dangled from his fob—and his silk handkerchief hung half-way out of his coat-pocket. His companion was a stout, elderly, shabby man, carrying a huge stick, or rather bludgeon. He wore a great-coat buttoned over his chest, a white hat with a mourning band, and very clumsy boots.

Malpas, upon finding himself face to face with these worthies, clenched his fists in a paroxysm of rage;—and then, as the Hebrew gentleman produced a writ, the miserable Colonel staggered back and sank upon a chair.

"Five tousand guinish ish de sum, and tree guinish ish de expensh, Colonel," said the bailiff—for such he was. "Dis leetle writ ish at de shoot of Mishter Emmershon. My name ish Ikey—Moshes Ikey, at your servish; and my housh ish in Fetter Lane. Tom, keep de door."

"All right," growled the bailiff's man, planting his back against the front door.

"Thunder and lightning!" roared Captain Tash, now bursting forth from the dining-room, inside the door of which he had been listening to what was passing in the hall; "the Colonel's going to quod—but he must not escape condign punishment. You sneaking, paltry, cowardly villain!" he exclaimed, springing towards Malpas and seizing him by the nose: "you are the greatest cur and the clumsiest villain I ever knew in all my life! So take that—and that—and this—and this—and that—and that!"

And, suiting the actions to the words, the redoubtable Rolando dragged the shrieking, yelling Colonel ignominiously by the nose round the hall, bestowing upon him sundry boxes on the ears and sidelong kicks on the breech by way of chastisement. Then suddenly releasing his victim, Captain Tash gave him one parting kick which sent him flying across the hall and ultimately sprawling on the door-mat.

The whole party, Venetia excepted, had in the meantime crowded at the entrance of the dining-room to witness this scene, which excited peals of laughter;—and when it was over, they returned to their seats—Captain Tash resuming his own chair and addressing himself again to the fruit and wine as calmly and composedly as if nothing had happened.

Then, while Colonel Malpas, crushed and confounded, was taking his departure in company with Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom, the Marquis of Leveson said, "We had better conclude our business at once and leave the house of a vile impostor as soon as we can."

"But where is Robin?" inquired Sackville. "Surely we may offer him a glass of wine?"

"Oh! there he is," observed Tash, coolly: and as every eye was directed towards the point indicated by the gallant officer, a portion of Robin's form and the tip of his nose were seen betwixt the opening of the window-curtains.

It was with great difficulty he could be persuaded to come forth and drink some wine: and when he had tossed off the contents of a glass which Sackville handed him, he glided back again to his lurk-

ing-place, now completely disappearing behind the curtains.

"We have heard an infamous accusation triumphantly refuted," said the Marquis of Leveson: "and if further evidence had been required on behalf of Mrs. Sackville, his Royal Highness and myself could have supplied it. For on that very Friday night which the coward scoundrel and vile cheat named as the period of his alleged success, and between the specified hours of nine and eleven, his Royal Highness and I can declare that we were each honoured by a visit from Mrs. Sackville, then Miss Trelawney; and we both emphatically repeat what we proclaimed ere now, that we had neithe. of us any reason to imitate the presumptuous assertions of Colonel Malpas."

"My lord," said Venetia, her voice now sounding tremulously for the first time since she had entered the room, "I have every reason to thank *you* for the noble candour and impartiality with which you have conducted these proceedings:"—then, her countenance suddenly lighting up with the irradiation of good-humoured archness, she observed as she rose from her seat, "Permit me to express a hope that the next time you agree to lay wagers relative to the result of a love campaign, you will take care whom you admit into the compact and trust with the secret. Otherwise you may chance to be dishonoured by the companionship of another Colonel Malpas."

Having thus spoken with a charming air of good natured remonstrance, she bowed and moved towards the door. The Prince of Wales instantaneously sprang forward to open it for her: and as Venetia passed him, he whispered tenderly, "Does our compact hold good, my angel?"

"It does," she replied, in her softest tone. "Next Monday evening—nine o'clock—Carlton House."

And darting upon him a look of profound meaning, she issued from the room. The Prince, scarcely able to conceal the joy inspired by this response, returned to his seat: and as the screen had hidden Venetia and himself from the view of the assembled guests during that hurried interchange of whispers, the circumstance passed unnoticed.

"We have now," said the Marquis of Leveson, "but one more matter of business to dispose of—and that is to decide who has won the sweepstakes of six thousand guineas. I think there cannot be a doubt upon the subject: and with your concurrence, my friends, I shall hand over the amount to Mr. Horace Sackville."

This proposal was agreed to; and the Bank-notes, together with the purse of sovereigns, were passed round the table to Venetia's husband.

Horace consigned the notes to his pocket, saying, "I thank you all for helping me to a wife and a fortune. As for this purse, I must beg Captain Tash to accept it."

"It is in the nature of gifts that I never refuse," exclaimed the gallant officer. "And now," he continued, rising from his seat and lifting a tumbler of wine to his lips, "I must drink to the health of my friend Mr. Sackville—and long life to him! But as it would be rude not to pay my respects to Sir Douglas Huntingdon," he went on to say, refilling the tumbler he had just emptied, "I must drink to *his* health:"—then, after draining the glass, and while replenishing it, he added, "Likewise the Right Honourable the Earl of Curzon:"—and after another brief pause, during which he poured the draught down his capacious throat, he said, "Forasmuch as there is but another tumblerful in the decanter, it would be a pity not to dispose of it to advantage—and so I will drink it to the health of any whom such health may concern."

The Prince, the Marquis of Leveson, the Earl, and Sir Douglas had all drunk quite enough to be in a humour to laugh heartily at Captain Tash's freaks: nor was Horace, though far more temperate, and indeed perfectly sober, inclined to be less jovial on the occasion. But so soon as the gallant officer had exhausted all the wine as well as his catalogue of excuses for disposing of it, Sackville bade his friends good night and left the room. Venetia was waiting for him in another apartment, to which the accommodating butler had shown her: and before the newly-married couple took their departure in the carriage that was waiting for them, they informed Mr. Plumpstead that he might enter their service at Acacia Cottage on the morrow.

The carriages of the other guests were soon announced—the party broke up—and when Mrs. Malpas returned home from her plebeian relatives in the City, she heard that her husband had been soundly thrashed in the first place and taken away to a sponging-house afterwards.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE TRIAL.

On the morning that succeeded the incidents just related, the Court-house of the Old Bailey was thronged to excess: for Mr. Paul Dysart was to stand his trial on the charge of feloniously killing and slaying the Honourable George Sefton. A second count in the indictment accused him of fighting a duel and thereby breaking his Majesty's peace—although, be it observed, his Majesty was a hopeless lunatic at the time and much more likely to break the peace himself than preserve it. Such however was the legal fiction and phraseology: and Mr. Dysart was arraigned accordingly.

His wife, Lady Ernestina, was not in court: but she was close at hand—indeed, warming herself comfortably by the fire in the drawing-room of the governor of Newgate. She was a lady of rank, and was therefore thus courteously treated by the governor. Had she been a poor man's wife, she would have had to stand all day in the open street, or else at the public-house opposite the court—unless indeed she had chosen to be present during the trial.

But while the fiction of the so-called British Constitution declares that all persons are equal in the eye of the law, the administrators, functionaries, and officials of the law take very good care that such shall not be the case. Thus, inasmuch as several of the witnesses engaged in the present case were of aristocratic birth, they were accommodated with seats upon the bench: and Lord Herbert, the principal witness, sate next to the Recorder and chatted familiarly with him while the clerk was swearing the jury. Now, had the witnesses been costermongers or tinkers—or any other individuals belonging to the working-class—they would not have dared approach the sacred limit of the judicial bench.

Moreover, as Mr. Dysart had married into an aristocratic family, he was accommodated with a chair in the dock; and the turnkey who had charge of him, was desired by the governor not to stand too near "the unfortunate gentleman." We may also observe that during the whole trial, he was never spoken of, either by Judge, counsel, or witnesses, otherwise than as *Mr. Dysart:* whereas, had he been a working-man, the said Judge, counsel, and witnesses would not have thought of speaking of him otherwise than as *the prisoner* or *the accused.* Such a fortunate thing is it to be either rich or else connected with the aristocracy in this country!

Ah! poor working-men—sons and daughters of toil—producers of everything and consumers of almost nothing—ye scarcely seem to know how utterly, completely, and entirely ye are oppressed, enslaved, and trampled upon by the arrogant, indolent, and tyrannical aristocracy!

Mr. Dysart, on entering the dock, bowed politely to the Judge and jury, and then seated himself with an air of confidence and composure: for he felt assured that even if the jury should find him guilty of the most aggravated charge, and the bench should thereupon doom him to death, the Prince Regent would accord him a full pardon. He was therefore comparatively easy in his mind—looking upon the present ordeal as a great annoyance, but by no means as a predicament of terrible danger.

The jury having been sworn, and the Recorder having finished laughing at the joke which Lord Herbert had just whispered in the judicial ear, the trial commenced. The Attorney-General appeared to prosecute; and he contented himself with a mere outline of the case, very considerately abstaining from emphasis on the strongest points, and putting the weakest prominently forward as if he were actually furnishing the jury with an excuse to acquit the prisoner. But on the previous day he had prosecuted a working-man for sedition: and *then* how he exaggerated every minute detail and by his eloquence invested the feeblest point with an overwhelming power to crush the accused! But Mr. Dysart had married the niece of the Marquis of Leveson—and so the Attorney-General did not wish to send him to the scaffold.

The law-officer having opened the case, Lord Herbert was sworn as a witness. He did not leave his place on the bench near the Recorder—neither did he rise from his seat, but gave his evidence as comfortably as if lounging in his own drawing-room. He was a tall, thin man—of about fifty-five years of age—with iron-grey hair—and a sprawling, awkward, uncouth figure. He was immensely vain—outrageously arrogant—fond of hearing himself talk—and yet as empty-headed as lords generally are. He had a habit of hesitating so much in his speech, that it seemed like a natural impediment and made it painful to listen to him. In fact, he was a shallow-pated numskull; and if he had not been an aristocrat, would have been written down an ass.

"I believe, my lord," said the Attorney-General, "you are acquainted with Mr. Dysart, the gentleman whose case is under investigation?"

"Haw—hem—ah—Oh! yes—perfectly well acquainted with Mr. Dysart," responded Lord Herbert, crossing one leg over the other.

"And I believe your lordship gave a grand entertainment to a party of noblemen and gentlemen in the beginning of June, of the present year?"

"Hem—hah—haw—Oh! yes—a dinner-party."

"At which Mr. Dysart was present?"

"Haw—aye—yes—haw—Mr. Dysart was present—he—haw."

"And the lamented deceased, the Honourable George Sefton, was likewise of the party?"

"Eh—haw—hem—Oh! yes—George Sefton—haw—hem—was there."

"I believe that when the cloth was removed and the dessert was placed upon the table, a dispute arose upon some matter?"

"Oh—ah—hem—a dispute about *Tantivy*, the winner—haw—of the Oaks—hem—and also about *Old Fogey*, another crack racer—haw."

"And Mr. Dysart gave the Honourable George Sefton the lie, I believe?"

"Hem—hah—yes—I'm afraid he did. Then, you know, high words—hem—haw—ensued—and Mr. Dysart flung a glass of wine in Sefton's face—haw—haw—and Sefton flew into a rage—haw—and I don't know how it was—haw—orhow it came about exactly—hem—hem—but pistols were talked of—and—and—and—pistols were got—haw—haw—and then—yes, then——"

"Pray don't hurry yourself, my lord," said the Judge: "there's plenty of time, and we have got the whole day before us."

"Oh! certainly," observed the Attorney-General. "Your lordship was explaining with your lordship's wonted clearness and perspicuity, how pistols were obtained——"

"Ah—yes—haw—truly," exclaimed the nobleman, lolling back in his seat and running his fingers complaisantly through his hair, which stood upright all over his head. "Well—as I was saying, then—haw—he—haw—it was proposed to fight—hem—hah—across the table—and I believe—I'm afraid—hem—haw—I'm afraid Mr. Dysart fired—hem—before the signal—haw—was given. Sefton fell dead—haw—'twas a bad business—haw—and that's all I know—hem—of the matter."

And having thus given his evidence, Lord Herbert indulged in a long yawn, stretching out his sprawling legs till every joint cracked audibly.

Dysart's counsel rose to cross-examine the nobleman: but the Attorney-General threw a deprecatory look upon him; and the barrister, fearful of giving offence to the great law-officer as well as to the Judge upon the bench, contented himself by asking some trivial question just to save appearances, and resumed his seat.

The Honourable George Macnamara, who sate next to Lord Herbert, now gave his testimony to the following purport:—

"I remember the entertainment at my Lord Herbert's. It was in the beginning of June. About twelve or fourteen noblemen and gentlemen were present. I was one of the guests: Mr. Dysart was another;—and the Honourable George Sefton was likewise there. A dispute arose relative to *Tantivy* and *Old Fogey.* These horses both belonged to Mr. Sefton; and Mr. Dysart was understood to have bet heavily upon them. From a word that Mr. Sefton let fall, Mr. Dysart fancied that he did not mean the horses to run; and he called him a scoundrel and a cheat. Mr. Sefton called him a liar. We were all pretty jolly—I may

indeed say we were all drunk. Lord Herbert was certainly not sober. Mr. Dysart challenged Mr. Sefton to a duel across the table; and Lord Herbert produced his pistols. Seconds were appointed; and it was agreed that at a given signal the hostile parties should fire. This took place in Lord Herbert's dining-room. Mr. Dysart and Mr. Sefton received the pistols at the same moment; and Mr. Dysart instantaneously discharged his pistol point blank at Mr. Sefton. The signal was not given at all. Mr. Sefton uttered a cry—sprang straight up at least a foot from the floor—and then dropped dead. I am bound to say that Mr. Dysart, when he fired, exclaimed, '*Take that, you young villain!*'—or words to the same effect."

The Honourable George Macnamara, not being a peer, was subjected to some little cross-examination: but his testimony was not shaken in the slightest degree.

Lieutenant Apsley, who was also one of the party at Lord Herbert's house, was next summoned as a witness: and he not only corroborated Mr. Macnamara's evidence, but clearly proved that Dysart could not possibly have fired in the mistaken belief that the signal was given. For this signal was to consist of the words, "One—two—three," deliberately uttered; and at the last word the duellists were to fire: whereas Mr. Dysart had discharged his pistol before even the first word of the signal was spoken.

Some other evidence was given; and the case for the prosecution closed.

The prisoner's counsel made as able a speech as the damnatory nature of the evidence and his own fears of offending the "big-wigs" would allow: but he entirely glossed over the startling fact which had come out in Macnamara's evidence—namely, that Lord Herbert had supplied the pistols. Not that the point would have helped Dysart's case at all: still it was one which a conscientious barrister, unawed by the frowns of the bench, would not have failed to touch upon.

Having concluded his speech, the counsel for the defence called several witnesses to prove that Mr. Dysart was one of the mildest, most forbearing, amiable, and good-tempered men in the whole world: and inasmuch as the said witnesses (none of whom had ever seen Dysart before in their lives) had been paid ten pounds a-piece to give him this brilliant character, it must be allowed that they could not well attribute to him fewer virtues considering how handsomely they were remunerated for their trouble.

The Attorney-General rose to reply. He began by remarking that never in the whole course of his professional career had it been his good fortune to listen to evidence so lucidly, clearly, intelligibly, and impartially given as that of Lord Herbert—one of the brightest ornaments of that great and glorious Aristocracy which was the pride, the glory, and the ornament of this free, happy, and enlightened country. It was a pleasure (continued the Attorney-General) to behold a man of Lord Herbert's rank, leaving his sumptuous mansion at the West End, and cheerfully coming down to a public tribunal to further the ends and assist the aims of justice. It had been stated in the evidence of Mr. Macnamara that the party of noblemen and gentlemen assembled at Lord Herbert's mansion on the melancholy occasion alluded to, had indulged somewhat freely in the use of the grape: but surely a little excess in this manner was not to be wondered at, when it was considered how heavily the legislative duties attached to the noble lord's proud position as a peer of the realm, must at times press upon his lordship.

As the newspapers said next day, "the learned Attorney-General then went carefully over the evidence;" but so carefully did the learned gentleman perform this part of his duty, that he pretty nearly told the jury, at least in terms as plain as he dared venture upon, that they would do well to acquit Mr. Dysart.

The learned Recorder, who had been fast asleep during the Attorney-General's closing speech, now woke up: and, turning to his notes, he proceeded to sum up the case to the jury. Imitating the example of the prisoner's counsel and the Attorney-General, the learned Judge made not the sligtest allusion to the fact that Lord Herbert had provided his own pistols for the duellists, and had allowed so scandalous a scene to take place at his own mansion and in his own dining-room: much less did the learned Recorder think of telling this same Lord Herbert that he ought to have been included in the indictment, as an accessory to the crime for which the prisoner was then in the presence of the jury. No such thing. But the Judge *did* also imitate the Attorney-General by travelling out of his way to eulogise Lord Herbert in particular and the Aristocracy in general: and he further took a leaf out of the Attorney-General's book by hinting that the best thing the jury could do would be to acquit Mr. Dysart.

The jury, however, seemed to take quite a different view of the matter: so that without much deliberation, and also without leaving the box, they returned a verdict of *Wilful Murder against Paul Dysart.*

Every eye was turned upon the prisoner to behold how he received the record which heralded the crowning act in the drama—namely, the condemnation to death. A sudden pallor overspread his features, as if a spasm convulsed him at the moment: but the next instant he was calm, collected, and confident as before. It was at first a frightful shock to be found guilty of *murder*, the bare mention of which terrible word was enough to make the gallows and all the dread paraphernalia of death spring up before his startled imagination: but this feeling was promptly relieved by the recollection that his wife held a document which could compel the Prince Regent to open the doors of his dungeon and recall him forth to freedom.

The Recorder put on the black cap, and in the usual stereotyped form of verbiage pronounced the awful sentence of the law—which was that Paul Dysart should be taken back to the place whence he came, and thence to a place of execution, where he should be hung by the neck until he was dead: and the Recorder concluded by expressing a hope that the Lord would have mercy upon his soul!

Execrable imposture!—vile barbarism!—diabolical iniquity! Man proves merciless in his vengeance, and yet hopes that God will be merciful. But should not Man follow the example of this Almighty Power whom he invokes?

It was now four o'clock in the afternoon—Dysart was conveyed back to Newgate—the Recorder went to dine with Lord Herbert—the Common-Sergeant took his place upon the bench—and the trial of petty felons occupied the rest of the evening. The crowd dispersed, each individual remarking to his friend "I wonder when he will be hung!"

Meantime the governor of Newgate proceeded to his drawing-room, where Lady Ernestina was seated: and, inasmuch as it suited her purpose to manifest the deepest anxiety relative to the result of the trial, he fancied it to be incumbent upon him to break the tidings as gently as possible. Then she fell into a strong fit: and when she had performed this little piece of tragedy, she wildly demanded to see her dear, dear husband!

The governor accordingly conducted Lady Ernestina to Dysart's cell: and precipitating herself into his arms, she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses. The governor retired: and then the lady grew calmer. Dysart was completely deceived by her manner, her words, her looks, and her tears; and he fancied she experienced a return of all that enthusiastic affection which had formerly induced her to become his wife.

"I don't altogether deserve so much kindness at your hands, Ernestina," he said: "but I'll make up for the past when once I am out of this cursed place. Don't cry—the annoyance and vexation are only temporary——"

"But to think that such a dreadful sentence should ever have been passed!" exclaimed Ernestina, with a simulation of the profoundest emotion.

"Well, we were not altogether unprepared for it—at least I was not," said her husband: "and, thank heaven, you have got a talisman which will speedily open these prison-doors. Ah! how surprised the Prince will be to find that the lady of his romantic adventure at Beechey Manor is none other than the niece of his intimate friend the Marquis of Leveson!"

"And when shall I communicate with his Royal Highness?" asked Ernestina. "Since I have returned to my uncle's residence, he has not once called——"

"You must see the Prince to-morrow, Ernestina," said Dysart, impressively. "There is no time to be lost. The Recorder will make his report next week——"

"Yes—I will see the Prince to-morrow, if possible," observed Lady Dysart. "Shall I go to Carlton House—or write and beg an interview?"

"Whichever you think advisable. But of course his Royal Highness can do nothing *officially* until after he has received the Recorder's report: before that report is made, the Prince is supposed to know nothing of the case. But *privately* it will be as well not only to prepare him for what he will have to do, but also to exact from him a promise that he will comply with the terms of the solemn compact he has signed."

"Yes—I will see him to-morrow, Paul," said Ernestina: "and afterwards, if it be not too late, I will hasten hither with the particulars of our interview."

"And if it should be too late to-morrow evening, you will come early on the following day?" said Dysart, interrogatively.

"Ah! I shall be only too glad to bring you good news," she answered, apparently with much emotion. "But the result cannot be otherwise—for the Prince Regent must and shall fulfil the terms of his compact."

"It rests only with you to compel him," observed Dysart: then, in a solemn tone, he added, "Remember, Ernestina, my life is in your hands!"

"And I will save it," she exclaimed, flinging herself into his arms.

She then took leave of her husband;—and as she returned in a hackney-coach to Leveson House in Albemarle Street, she said to herself, "All suspicion on his part is lulled asleep—he places the fullest confidence in me—and I must manage to retain it until the very last!"

Then, as she threw herself back in the vehicle, she felt a cold shudder thrill through her form at the thought that if her plans were carried out with success, the ground which she had just passed over in the Old Bailey would in a few short days be covered with a densely packed multitude to witness the crowning catastrophe in Dysart's career: but, angry with herself the next moment for giving way to what she deemed a weakness, she murmured, "Yes—it is necessary: I must be rid of this demon whom I conjured up to torment me. Ah! it is the tenderest love which turns to the bitterest hatred and seeks for the most terrible vengeance!"

On arriving in Albemarle Street Ernestina was informed that her uncle the Marquis was engaged with Mrs. Owen of Richmond: and she was therefore compelled to wait till this lady had taken her departure, before she could see Lord Leveson. We may observe that Ernestina knew nothing of the conspiracy that had been hatched against the Princess of Wales, and in which the three eldest Misses Owen were engaged: and she therefore attributed her uncle's intimacy with the mother of those young ladies to an affair of gallantry.

The Marquis and Mrs. Owen remained in private discussion together for nearly an hour;—and at the expiration of this interval, when the lady had taken her departure, Ernestina had an opportunity of communicating to her noble uncle the result of the trial at the Old Bailey.

"Now, then, Ernestina," he said, with a look of deep meaning, "you will be enabled to carry out your projects, as you have explained them to me."

"I shall, my dear uncle," she responded: "but they will require the utmost tact and caution—and I must continue to play the hypocrite towards Dysart with such consummate skill——"

"Which you will be enabled to do, Ernestina," added the Marquis, who seemed to be in a desperate hurry about something. "But I must leave you to work out these schemes by yourself—for I am compelled to undertake a journey to France——"

"To France!" exclaimed Lady Dysart, in astonishment.

"Yes—and without delay, too—on very important business indeed," said the Marquis. "I have ordered my travelling-carriage and shall depart in an hour, the moment I have eaten a mouthful of dinner."

"You will travel all night, then?" said Ernestina. "It is now past seven o'clock."

"Yes—I shall travel without stopping to Dover, where I hope to arrive at about three in the morning. I can then snatch a few hours' sleep, and sail by the packet-boat at ten or eleven. Let us sit down to dinner, then—for I am sure you must be in want of refreshment after so exciting and disagreeable a day."

"Not disagreeable as to the result of the trial," observed Lady Dysart, significantly.

The uncle and niece now repaired to the dining-room, where they continued their discourse as they partook of the repast, until a domestic announced that the travelling-carriage was in readiness. The Marquis then took an affectionate leave of his niece, in whose hands he placed a cheque for a sum of money to meet her wants during his absence: and in a few minutes he was whirled as rapidly away as four post-horses and a lightly-constructed vehicle could bear him.

Ernestina remained alone in the dining-room, pondering upon the various circumstances which had occurred within the last few weeks, and revolving in her mind the plans and projects which they had been so fertile in suggesting. In this manner an hour slipped away—and the clock had struck nine, when a footman entered to announce that a person wished to speak to her ladyship upon a matter of some importance.

"A person! Who is it?" she ejaculated, impatiently.

"A man, your ladyship: but he refuses to give his name or state his business."

"Perhaps it is the Marquis whom he wants——"

"No, my lady: I told him that his lordship had just left London, and he said it was to your ladyship he wished to speak."

"Then show him in," exclaimed Ernestina, wondering who the individual could be.

The domestic bowed and withdrew—but almost immediately returned, ushering in a man dressed in a coarse style, with a great thick coat, a neckerchief drawn up to his mouth, and a broad-brimmed hat in his hand. The servant retired—the man advanced—and as the light fell upon his features, Ernestina instantaneously recognised the individual who had dug the grave for her paramour!

CHAPTER LX.

UNPLEASANT VISITORS.

A COLD chill fell upon the lady, as if her flesh had suddenly come in contact with the slimy coils of a serpent: and the colour fled from her cheeks. She was struck as if with an omen of evil—for the appearance of this man, whom she only knew by the name of Jones, and which name she believed to be an assumed one, was indeed but too well calculated of itself, apart from any repugnant associations connected with him, to arouse a mortal terror in her soul.

"What do you want?—what do you require?" she demanded, in a voice that was nearly suffocated by her emotions.

"I just want to have a few words with your ladyship—that's all," said the man: and advancing towards the fire, he coolly and deliberately took a seat.

Ernestina fell back in the chair from which she had started on his entrance: but composing herself as well as she was able, she made a sign for him to continue.

"Your husband, ma'am—I mean your ladyship's husband," he resumed, endeavouring to give his hang-dog countenance an insinuating look, "has got himself into a precious scrape—and if he don't mind he'll be a croaker before ten days are over."

"But what do you want with me?" demanded Ernestina, impatiently.

"I'll explain myself all in good time," he continued. "If you're in a hurry, I'm not particularly so — and there's the difference. Besides, you shouldn't look so precious glum at an old acquaintance. I suppose you know it was me that got up the expedition that night when the Prince and the Marquis were taken to the Manor: and of course you know it was me that dug the grave at the Blackheath villa. Well, I was treated like a gentleman by your ladyship's husband—he paid me handsome—and now I want to serve him. That's the object of my business."

"But who are you?" demanded Ernestina, who had shuddered visibly when the wretch alluded to the digging of the grave.

"Ah! I recollect," exclaimed the man. "Mr. Dysart told me when I was at Beechey Manor that you only knew me by the name of Jones. Nevertheless, my name is no more Jones than your ladyship's is: and as there's no use for any disguise or concealment that I can see, I may as well explain to you at once that my proper name is Dan'el Coffin——"

"What! the Public Executioner!" cried the miserable lady, springing to her feet and gazing upon the man with horror depicted upon her countenance: then, as the account of the burglary at Mrs. Owen's, and which she had read in the newspapers, flashed to her mind, she instantaneously understood the circumstances in which Daniel Coffin had sought refuge at Beechey Manor with the pseudonym of Jones.

"Don't alarm yourself, ma'am," said Coffin, with imperturbable coolness: "I ain't come to hang *you*. But pray sit down again—you see I make myself at home, because I want to speak to you on very particular business; and the more you won't hear me, the longer you'll keep me."

Struck by the truth of this remark, and anxious to get rid of her dreadful visitor as soon as possible, Ernestina reseated herself, and again made a hurried motion for him to continue.

"Well, my lady," resumed Coffin, "as I was observing just now, Mr. Dysart has got into a precious hobble—and as the Recorder will make his report at the beginning of next week, it will be all dickey with your husband ten days hence if so be nothing's done in the meantime. Now, as I've watched Old Bailey cases for some years past and am pretty familiar with 'em, I can tell your ladyship that there's no hope of a reprieve, much less of pardon, seeing the jury didn't recommend him to mercy. It's clear, then—and there's no use in deceiving oneself—that he'll be scragged on Monday week: and so, as I've a great respect for him, I want to know what you'll give if I help him to escape out of Newgate."

"Escape!" cried Ernestina, recoiling from the bare idea of a result which would fatally frustrate all her plans.

"Ah! you may well be astonished at such a proposal, ma'am," said Coffin, entirely mistaking the cause of her sudden start and emphatic exclamation. "But I don't think it's altogether impossible. At least it's worth while to have a try for it. You see that as your husband's a genelman and connected with the aristocracy, he will be allowed many indulgences which poor devils in trouble couldn't obtain for either love or money: and as you can visit him without being searched, you can easily take him a file and a jemmy. A jemmy, ma'am, is a small crow-bar—a very handy thing at times, as genelmen of the crack and pannie profession well know. It's the best thing to open a shop with, ma'am—a capital stock in trade, as one may say, for an enterprising individual anxious to set his-self up in business. Well, my lady, if Mr. Dysart can get out of the condemned crib and manage to reach the roof of the Stone Jug—or even let himself into one of the yards—I could have a party of leary chaps all in readiness outside, to help him to do the rest: and then, a post-chaise and four spanking horses being close at hand——"

"I thank you," interrupted Ernestina, who had listened thus far with the tortures of impatience: "but your proposal cannot be accepted. My uncle, the Marquis of Leveson, has written a strong and appealing letter to the Prince Regent on my unfortunate husband's behalf; and I have every hope and confidence therein. But should Mr. Dysart endeavour to escape and be caught in the fact, all chance of reprieve or pardon would be frustrated. I shall give you five guineas for your trouble in calling upon me——"

But scarcely had Ernestina taken out her purse as she thus spoke, when the footman entered the room, saying, "Mr. Lawrence Sampson wishes to speak to your ladyship."

Coffin had started up the instant the handle of the door was heard to turn—and thus the domestic did not observe that he had been previously sitting in a familiar manner in Lady Ernestina Dysart's company. But when the terrible name of the Bow Street officer was mentioned, the Hangman became visibly troubled. Ernestina saw in a moment that a scene was to be avoided in the presence of the footman: and, with admirable composure, she immediately said, "Show Mr. Sampson into the adjoining room."

The domestic retired: and the instant the door closed behind him, the lady said in a hurried, altered, and even hollow tone, "Do you think he has tracked you hither?"

"It looks like it," answered Coffin. "And yet, if he had, he wouldn't send in to say he wanted to speak to you—but he would make a rush of it at once with his runners—or else lie in wait in the street till I went out again."

"But what on earth can he want with me?" said the lady, trembling from head to foot, the thought of the tragedy at the Blackheath villa being uppermost in her mind.

"Oh! he doesn't want you, ma'am, for any harm," returned Daniel Coffin: "or else he'd have come bang in and have taken you at once. I'm up to all the dodges of these rum customers. Most likely, after all, he's got a scent of me; and not being quite sure of it, is come to ask whether such a genelman as Mr. Dan'el Coffin has paid your ladyship a visit this evening. You'd better not keep him waiting——"

"No—it would be imprudent," said Ernestina: then, somewhat reassured by the observations of the Hangman relative to herself, she placed the five guineas upon the table, observing, "You can leave the house quietly in a few moments."

She then quitted the apartment: and summoning all her courage to her aid, she entered the adjoining room, where Mr. Sampson rose from a seat and made her a profound salutation.

"Your ladyship will pardon me for intruding at this late hour, and at a moment when your ladyship's grief must be so acute after the sad result of to-day," began the officer: "but I am sure that when I mention the object of my intrusion, and when I add that I shall not detain your ladyship three minutes——"

"You need not apologise, Mr. Sampson," interrupted Ernestina, now regaining complete confidence, as she felt assured that neither his manner nor his words denoted a hostile intent. "I am indeed overwhelmed with sorrow: but you must not think that I bear any ill will towards yourself. I know that in arresting my husband, you only did your duty——"

"Thank your ladyship for that acknowledgment," said the officer.

"Be seated, Mr. Sampson," continued Ernestina, affably motioning towards a chair—but principally exhibiting this courtesy in order to gain sufficient time to enable Daniel Coffin to effect a safe retreat from the house: then, as she herself took a seat, she said, "And now, Mr. Sampson, you can explain the purpose of your visit."

As Ernestina spoke, she affected a profound mournfulness: and now she held her handkerchief to her face as if to conceal her tears on account of her husband, but really to veil the emotion which she might experience in case Sampson addressed her upon any unpleasant topic. And it was well that she took this precaution: for the very first words which he proceeded to utter in explanation of his visit, sent the blood with an ice-chill to her heart and made her entire form thrill with horror and alarm.

"Your ladyship is probably aware that in the month of June last Sir Archibald Malvern, a baronet living in Hanover Square, disappeared suddenly and in a most mysterious manner. His son, Mr. Valentine—or Sir Valentine, as he ought perhaps to be called—entrusted to me the duty of making all possible researches to ascertain the fate of his parent: but my proceedings and inquiries in the matter have hitherto proved completely abortive. This evening, however, an incident has transpired which seems to throw a glimmer of light—faint and feeble, it is true—upon the occurrence."

"But how can this possibly regard me, Mr. Sampson?" inquired Ernestina, anxious to be relieved from the tortures of an excruciating suspense; and removing her handkerchief from her face, she threw a hurried glance upon him:—then, perceiving that there was nothing ominous in his looks nor manner, she felt her courage revive.

"It does not regard your ladyship," was the answer: "but it may regard Mr. Dysart."

"Good heavens! surely you would not attri-

bute to him the perpetration of such a crime!" exclaimed Ernestina. "Is he not sufficiently crushed——"

"Pardon me, my lady," interrupted Sampson: "but no suspicion of the sort has been excited with reference to your ladyship's husband. Grant me a few minutes—and I will explain myself. I must inform your ladyship, in the strictest confidence, that Mr. Dysart's arrest took place at Beechey Manor in consequence of an anonymous letter sent early the same morning to Bow Street, and which letter was instantaneously placed by the magistrate in my hands."

"An anonymous letter!" exclaimed Ernestina, with well affected surprise and indignation.

"Yes—here it is," said Larry Sampson, as he produced *her own note* and handed it to her—that same note which she had despatched by old Underdown to the office at Bow Street, as the reader cannot fail to remember.

She took it with trembling hands and pale countenance: and as she pretended to run her eyes over its contents—those well known contents—she made a desperate struggle to regain her courage.

"Your ladyship may well be annoyed," observed Sampson—for even the astute and cunning officer was liable to mistake the causes of emotion and excitement now and then. "You are disgusted at the treachery practised by the anonymous correspondent—and you are shocked at observing the handwriting to be that of a lady, and evidently an accomplished one."

"Ah! Dysart has proved false to me—and it is doubtless his mistress who thus betrayed him!" cried Ernestina, with all the appearance of the most genuine anguish. "But what has this to do with the disappearance of Sir Archibald Malvern?"

"I will tell your ladyship. This evening Mr.

Valentine Malvern called upon me—as he often does—to inquire whether I had made any progress in my researches. I received him in a room where a number of papers lay scattered upon a table. This letter was unguardedly left amongst them: in fact, it lay open. His eye happened to catch a glimpse of it: he seized it—greedily devoured its contents—examined the writing with the utmost attention—and then cried out, '*Yes—'tis the same—'tis the same!*' To be brief, he explained to me that amongst his father's papers he had some weeks back discovered a note in a beautiful female hand, but without date, address, or signature, and the contents of which, though worded with a caution amounting to ambiguity, indicated a gallant intrigue. The handwriting of that tender epistle and of this anonymous letter are the same—and Mr. Valentine Malvern had instantaneously recognised the fact. What, then, is the inference which he drew? Why, that the writer of the anonymous letter is most probably known to Mr. Dysart—perhaps some lady who has a spite against him: and if it could be ascertained who she is, it would as a matter of course at the same time establish the identity of the fair and frail correspondent of the lost Sir Archibald Malvern. Not that even this discovery might clear up the mystery of his disappearance: still there is just the possibility that it would do so;—and Mr. Valentine is naturally impelled by a restless anxiety to leave no stone unturned in the investigation of his father's fate."

"I understand, Mr. Sampson—it is natural—very natural," said Ernestina, now terribly alarmed lest the officer should take it into his head to go and question her husband upon the subject and show him the anonymous letter, the writing of which he could not fail to recognise as her own. "But wherefore have you come to me?" she asked, in order to glean his views and intentions.

"Mr. Valentine Malvern begged and implored that I would lose no time in seeing your ladyship upon the subject: for he thought that painful as it must be to either your husband or yourself to be intruded upon at such a moment, it would notwithstanding be *less* improper or indelicate under existing circumstances to appeal to your ladyship than to Mr. Dysart in the matter."

"The handwriting is altogether unknown to me, Mr. Sampson," said Ernestina: "nor am I aware that my unfortunate husband had any reason to fear a lady's rancorous revenge. But if you will leave this note with me, I will break the subject to him to-morrow——"

"Ah! if your ladyship would be so kind!" exclaimed Sampson. "I know it must be a painful task for you to undertake, and that it cannot be otherwise than repugnant to your feelings: but when your ladyship reflects that a clue might be formed to the clearing up of a deep mystery——"

"I am quite ready to sacrifice my own feelings in the matter for the sake of a fellow-creature," observed Lady Ernestina Dysart: "and as I had some slight acquaintance with Sir Archibald Malvern, and his son is not altogether a stranger to me, it will afford me a melancholy satisfaction, in the midst of my own deep sorrows, to be in any way serviceable in this matter."

"Your ladyship will ensure the lasting gratitude of Mr. Valentine Malvern," said Larry Sampson, rising from his seat. "I will take the liberty of calling to-morrow evening to learn the result of your ladyship's interview with Mr. Dysart, so far as this business is concerned."

The Bow Street officer then took his departure, to the infinite relief of Lady Ernestina, who had passed through an ordeal of harrowing tortures, bewildering sensations, and poignant memories during this interview.

But the moment the door of the apartment closed behind Mr. Lawrence Sampson, she flung the anonymous letter into the fire: and as she beheld it flame up and consume, she murmured to herself, "Thus perish the only evidence that existed of my perfidy towards Dysart."

She then bethought herself of Daniel Coffin the Hangman: and returning into the room where she had left him, she found it unoccupied and therefore concluded he had taken his departure. Banishing him from her thoughts, she now sate down to her writing-desk and penned the ensuing note:—

"*Leveson House, Oct. 11th, 1814.*

"Lady Ernestina Dysart presents her dutiful compliments to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, and humbly requests that his Royal Highness will honour her with a call to-morrow at eleven o'clock punctually. Lady Ernestina is well aware that under ordinary circumstances this demand would savour of the most insolent presumption: but as the circumstances are *extraordinary* and *peculiar*, she ventures to hope that his Royal Highness will vouchsafe compliance with her prayer, and that the visit thus besought will be paid with as much privacy as possible."

Having sealed and addressed this billet, Ernestina gave it to a domestic to take at once to Carlton House: and as it was now past ten o'clock and she was wearied with the exciting occurrances of the day, she retired to her own chamber.

But in the meantime, what had really become of Mr. Daniel Coffin?

When left by himself in the dining-room, he suddenly fell into a profound perplexity how to act. The visit of Mr. Lawrence Sampson was, to say the least, alarming;—and despite all the reasoning which the Hangman conjured up to persuade himself that the officer's presence had no reference to him, his evil conscience would not allow this idea to be so easily relied upon. That Sampson might have entered the house upon some pretext, but with the real object of making a *reconnoitre*, was probable enough; and in this case he had doubtless planted his followers in the street. At all events, Daniel Coffin did not deem it prudent to issue forth at once: while, on the other hand, he could not very well remain in the dining-room, during Ernestina's absence, without exciting the suspicions of any domestic who might chance to enter it.

He knew not exactly what to do: and it was without any fixed intention, but in obedience to one of those vague and undefined impulses which often prompt desperate men, that he gently opened the dining-room door and looked out into the hall. The porter had gone down to supper—not a living soul met the Hangman's view by the light of the lamp suspended to the ceiling in the hall.

A thought struck him! He had been told by the domestic, on his arrival, that the Marquis of Leveson was away from home; and Ernestina was therefore mistress of the establishment in her noble

uncle's absence. What if he were to hide himself for a few hours—until the next night even—in one of the unoccupied apartments of the spacious dwelling? Were he discovered, Ernestina must be appealed to in order to decide how the intruder was to be disposed of; and she *dared* not deal harshly with him. On the contrary, he would be safe beneath her protection. But then, as to food? He could very well wait four-and-twenty hours in a fasting condition when his personal security was concerned; and at all events it would be better to incur any risk or privation within the house than stand the chance of encountering Mr. Lawrence Sampson's myrmidons outside the threshold.

Rapid as thought alone can travel, did these reflections sweep through the brain of Daniel Coffin as he stood at the dining-room door, looking forth into the hall. There was also something in the adventure that pleased him; and his resolve was soon taken accordingly. Hastily ascending the great marble staircase, he reached the landing on the first storey, and opened the nearest door. It led into the Crimson Drawing-room which has been mentioned in preceding chapters. The fire was smouldering in the grate—two wax candles were burning upon the mantel-piece—and a tray, containing a couple of decanters of wine and a dish of biscuits, stood upon the table. This little refreshment had been served up for Mrs. Owen when she called upon the Marquis that afternoon; and the tray had not been removed.

The Hangman was well pleased at the sight thereof; and he speedily poured at least a pint of sherry down his capacious throat. This was so much to his taste, that he lost no time in paying his respects with equal devotion to the Port; and in a few minutes the decanters were completely drained. He then filled one of his ample pockets with the greater portion of the biscuits; and having thus self-appropriated the provender, he proceeded to examine the room with more attention than at first.

To remain concealed here was hopeless. The domestics, ere they retired for the night, would come to put out the fire and extinguish the candles. Whither should he go? Scarcely had he asked himself this question, when his eyes settled upon a door opposite to the one by which he had entered. He advanced to try it, but found it locked. This was no particularly formidable obstacle to Mr. Daniel Coffin. He felt in his pocket—drew forth a bunch of skeleton keys—and speedily opened the door. Taking one of the wax-tapers from the mantel, he passed into the adjoining room: and now, as the reader will no doubt have already understood, the Hangman had entered the first of that mysterious suite of apartments which Venetia Trelawney was led to explore on the evening of her visit to Leveson House.

Having hastily glanced around the room, which we have previously described as small but luxuriously furnished, the Hangman observed that there were wax-tapers upon the mantel. He accordingly lighted one of them, and then took back the one which he carried in his hand into the Crimson Drawing-room. This he did to prevent its being missed: and having restored it to its place, he retraced his way into the other apartment, carefully locking himself in by means of the skeleton key that had afforded him ingress.

He now examined this room with admiration and delight, muttering to himself a wish that he was the owner of that little paradise. Having attentively surveyed the sofas ranged round the walls, the vases of flowers, and the various articles of furniture, his eyes were uplifted towards the silver lamp that was suspended to the ceiling, but which was not burning now. After contemplating it for about a minute, he stood upon a chair to examine it more closely;—and thus convincing himself that it was real silver, he muttered, "Old Jeremy would give me a pretty penny for this! Well, I don't think I need go away empty-handed when I do take my departure."

Grimly smiling at this pleasant conceit, and already regarding the silver lamp as his own, Mr. Daniel Coffin descended from the chair—took a taper from the mantel—and passed into the adjoining room. This was smaller but more luxuriously furnished than the one he had just left; and instead of sofas, it contained *a number of large and massive arm-chairs, each provided with a cushion of immense size.* But there was no choice collection of fruits, sweets, and wines now upon the table—nor was the lamp with the ground-glass globe now lighted—as was the case when we introduced Venetia Trelawney to this apartment.

Without pausing many minutes, Daniel Coffin proceeded to open the door which faced him; and, still holding the taper in his hand, he entered the gallery of pictures and sculptures, At first he was not inclined to pay much attention to these works of art: but their subjects speedily altered his mood, turning his indifference into eager curiosity, wonder, and sensual delight. We have already in a previous chapter depicted a few of the statuary groups and glanced at one of the pictures: but we must now observe that there were other groups and other pictures the flagrant indecency of which would even have brought a blush to the cheeks of the inmates of a brothel. From the entrance of this gallery to the further extremity, the works of art became successively more and more indelicate, as if the whole purpose of the arrangement were gradually to lead on the imagination from the first petty shock, through all the phases of enhancing allurement, into the crowning grossness of the most nude and undisguised lasciviousness.

"Well, 'pon my soul, these noblemen are precious rum fellows to have such scenes as these in their houses," thought Daniel Coffin to himself, as with increasing amazement he passed along the gallery. "By goles! it gets worse and worse! If any body had told me he'd seen such a place in a nobleman's mansion, I shouldn't have believed him. And now that I recollect, this Marquis of Leveson is always holding forth in the House of Lords about the bad morals of the lower orders and the desecration of the Sabbath! Well, some men *are* hypocrites—rank impostors too! What statues—what paintings! The farther I advance, the more I seem to learn in the lessons of indecency. I suppose the Marquis brings his ladies here sometimes. I wonder whether his niece Ernestina has ever set foot in this gallery. If she has, she can't be much better than she should be: and I dare say she's not too. In fact, I suppose the Prince was enticed to Beechey Manor that night to be captivated by her charms. But Dysart kept his real motive snug enough, whatever it was. Well,

'pon my soul—my head begins to turn, and I feel all no-how looking at these pictures and images. Why, the purest virgin that ever stepped would leave this gallery as corrupt in mind as if she had passed through twenty years of debauchery and profligacy. Nell Gibson, who frequents the dark crib at the Folly Bridges, isn't so bad but that she'd be made worse by a ten minutes' walk up and down this gallery. And everything is so beautifully done too—the paintings as well as the statues! What a mint of money all this must have cost—and what a lot of sculptors and artists must have been employed to furnish so many different things! Aye, and doesn't the old Marquis come at times and gloat over them. What a many women have no doubt lost their virtue in consequence of a visit to this place: and what tales these walls could tell if they only had the gift of speech! But only suppose that a poor devil was to be seen selling cheap pictures and prints half so bad as these great expensive paintings—wouldn't the constables be down upon him in a jiffey, and no mistake!"

While thus musing, Mr. Daniel Coffin brought his inspection of the gallery to a close; and issuing forth, he returned into the room containing the large arm-chairs.

"Well, I think one of these concerns will be even more comfortable to sleep in for the night than the sofas in the room beyond," he thought to himself as he glanced slowly around. "Besides, I always sleep too heavy when I lay down—and I musn't stand a chance of being surprised napping."

Having come to this conclusion, the Hangman placed the wax-candle upon the table, and then deposited himself in one of the arm-chairs. But scarcely had he dropped his person upon the voluptuous-looking cushion, when a sharp click, like a clock giving warning, struck his startled ear; and at the same instant his wrists were caught in the manacles and his shoulders were fast griped by the strong steel bands that sprang forth from the wood-work of the treacherous chair.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Hangman, with a desperate struggle to release himself.

But his efforts would not have been more vain or futile, had a tremendous boa-constrictor suddenly wound its massive coils around him: the manacles were immoveable—the steel bands held his shoulders in an inextricable gripe—and the very chair itself was solidly fastened by the legs to the floor.

Finding that his endeavours were useless, and exhausted by their unavailing strenousness, the Hangman suddenly desisted from any further struggling with the treacherous chair and its potent mechanism: and as a subdued imprecation fell from his lips, the chill sweat of profound terror burst forth all over him, saturating his very garments and making his shirt cling to him like the cold clammy grave-clothes of the dead!

CHAPTER LXI.

ERNESTINA AND THE PRINCE.

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the day following the incidents just related; and Ernestina was alone in the Crimson Drawing Room.

She was seated near a harp—and it was evident from her looks and her manner that she was studying a part which she had to play. We do not mean aught in reference to music, although the instrument was there close at hand—but in reference to coquetry and seductive allurement.

Her hair was arranged in massive bands over her alabaster temples, and gathered with a graceful sweep in such a way that it showed the small and well folded ears. She had selected a dress which displayed her fine form to its most exciting and sensuous advantage, leaving the white plump shoulders bare, and allowing the grand fulness of the bosom to swell in more than half its glowing amplitude above the body of the robe. By a gentle inclination of her figure towards the harp, she was enabled to give her bright and polished neck so swan-like a curve that nothing could exceed the beauty of its arching gracefulness;—and, with an admirable prescience of coquettish effect mingled with a seductive languor, she knew that this position would enable the eye of a beholder to trace the symmetry of that sweet neck in its gradual and downward expansion into the noble foundation on which it rested.

The volume and voluptuous form of her bust were in this manner developed to the fullest advantage: and as she leant towards the harp with all the seeming ease and gracefulness of this really studied attitude, she threw into her looks a melancholy softness which added to the power of her great beauty. Her whole figure was thus sensuously languid and voluptuously drooping: her eyes were half-veiled by the long lashes beneath which their expression became all the more wanton—and the ripeness and fulness of her shape bespoke a subdued passion as profound and as luxurious as the looks that shone from under the softly drooping lids.

It was a very cold, damp, raw October day, with a leaden sky and a misty atmosphere: but the air of the Crimson Drawing-room was warm and perfumed. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate—and the porcelain vases exhaled a delicious fragrance that stole upon the sense without overpowering it.

But why, just as the time-piece upon the mantel struck eleven, did Lady Ernestina Dysart assume that studied air of mournful pensiveness and sensuous languor, as she bent towards the harp? Because a carriage had that moment stopped at the front-door—and she was at no loss to conjecture who the visitant was.

In less than a minute a domestic entered, announcing his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. The man immediately retired, closing the door behind him: but Ernestina retained that pensive attitude, as if she were so profoundly absorbed in her reflections that she heard not the entrance of the Prince nor the annunciation of his name.

We must here pause for a moment to state that his Royal Highness had called in compliance with Ernestina's note. He was not aware that he had as yet ever seen this lady: but he had heard much of her beauty—and he was not the man to let pass the opportunity of satisfying himself whether report spoke truly in that respect. Besides, he fancied that her ladyship might have something important to communicate from her uncle, the Marquis of Leveson, of whose abrupt departure for the Continent he was already aware. Several

reasons therefore induced him, even at some little inconvenience, to comply with the terms of Lady Ernestina Dysart's note: but now that he was ushered into the room where she was seated, he was somewhat surprised to observe the deep absorption and pensiveness of her attitude.

Her back was turned towards him, as she sate bending over the harp. He stood still for a few moments, struck by the dazzling whiteness of her neck and shoulders—the elegant shape of her head—and the flowing outlines of her figure. Still she remained motionless. He advanced a little, and now obtained a glimpse of the bust which glowed in the unveiled luxuriance of its charms against the harp. Upon that grandly developed bosom did the eyes of the royal voluptuary settle: and at the same instant Ernestina, affecting still to remain unconscious of his presence, and with half averted countenance, began to touch the strings of the instrument.

She was an accomplished musician—and the harp gave forth such sounds that ravished the ears of the Prince. The melody stole softly and sensuously upon him, in unison with the voluptuous feelings engendered by the beauteous form on which his eyes rested. The very warmth of the room and fragrance of the atmosphere increased this melting effect, dissolving all his soul into an ineffable tenderness. He stood like one enchanted: his pulses thrilled—the colour deepened upon his countenance—his eyes swam in passion's liquid fire. It seemed as if some unknown paradise on earth were opening to his comprehension at a moment when he had little expected that any such blissful development was in store for him.

And now, gradually did the lady turn her countenance in such a way towards the harp, that he caught her profile with that half-vanishing effect which Rembrandt loved so well to depict upon his canvass: and as the light, borrowing a roseate tint from the hue of the crimson curtains which shaded the windows, fell upon that faultless profile, the Prince started with a sudden recollection. But the lady still affected to perceive him not—and at the instant that he thus started, she made the splendid instrument give forth such a glorious volume of gushing golden melody that he was again struck motionless and transfixed with ineffable rapture.

But now he studied that profile intently: he marked also the glossy light brown hair—the high and polished brow. He saw the long silken lashes he observed the dark eye flashing beneath—he traced the outline of the aquiline nose, the well-cut lips of vivid scarlet, and the softly rounded chin. Then again did his looks settle upon the grand exuberance of the bosom that was now heaving visibly—white as snow, but warm and glowing to the eye: and then his looks once again travelled upward to the face which was gradually turning more and more towards him. The sea-shell pink which naturally belonged to her complexion was now deepening into the rich carnation hue: the blush gradually descended to her neck—thence suffusing itself over her bosom;—and the longer the Prince gazed, the more convinced did he become that his lips had glued themselves in impassioned kisses to those glowing cheeks—that his hand had pressed and his head been pillowed upon that heaving, swelling bosom—and that the entire form had lain palpitating with love and desire in his arms!

Slowly now did Ernestina raise her head and turn her eyes towards him,—those large lustrous eyes looking up full into his, and swimming with that oriental languor which he had observed and which had ravished him before! Aye—and he was no longer uncertain nor in doubt as to where and when those seductive looks had previously shed their elysian influence upon his soul: and falling on his knees at the lady's feet, he exclaimed, "Heavens! are you my lovely unknown—unknown no longer—but Ernestina Dysart?"

"Oh! then you are not angry with me, beloved Prince?" murmured the syren, flinging her snowy arms around his neck.

"Angry with you—impossible!" cried the royal voluptuary, straining her to him even as he knelt, and covering her warm and glowing cheeks with passionate kisses. "But what means this mystery?" he exclaimed at length, rising and taking a chair by her side. "Are you really Lady Ernestina Dysart, the niece of my friend Leveson?—and if so, what meant that scene of mingled outrage, mystery, and love which characterised the night of our first acquaintance?"

"I will tell you everything in good time, my dear Prince," answered the lady, as she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses with an appearance of the fondest affection. "But whatever the explanations may be, promise——"

"I can promise anything—everything—to such a charmer as you," interrupted the Prince, his head already turning with blissful rapture, as on the night at Beechey Manor. "Ah! how rejoiced I am that we have met again!"—and he devoured her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom with his burning kisses. "But tell me what you have to say—and then—and then—talk to me of love, only of love!"

"Listen patiently if you will, and attentively if you can, for a few minutes," said Ernestina, with a smile of such delicious archness and with a look of such wanton meaning that a lava-stream of fierce and fiery passion boiled in the veins of the amorous Prince: for her lips revealed rows of pearl and seemed to breathe the ambrosial fragrance of paradise, and her glances went with an electric influence to his very heart's core.

"Let me pillow my head here," he said, reclining it upon her shoulder: "and now proceed. I am all attention."

"In the first place, then," she resumed, "you must know that I am really that same Ernestina whom you have named, and that the Marquis of Leveson is my uncle. Before I married that wretched being, Dysart, and when I was living beneath this roof, my uncle would never allow me to meet your Royal Highness when you called. He took every precaution to prevent me from being seen by you——"

"Ah! the sly dog," murmured the Prince: "he knew that to behold you would be to love you. But go on, my dear Ernestina—go on."

"Moreover," she continued, "he would never permit me to attend any balls or parties at which you were likely to be present—and he invariably found some excuse for not introducing me at Court. After my marriage—my unfortunate, unhappy, hated marriage——"

"Ah! you do not love your husband, then?" said the Prince.

"I hate—I detest—I abhor him!" cried Ernestina emphatically. "Besides," she immediately added in a subdued and murmuring tone, "I love you—and you only!"

"Thanks for that assurance, my angel," said the Prince, pressing her warmly towards him: and for the time being, even the incomparable Venetia Trelawney was forgotten by the royal voluptuary. "But what were you going to observe?—that after your marriage——"

"I was cut out, as it were, from that society in which alone I was likely to meet your Royal Highness——"

"Do not *Royal Highness* me," murmured the Prince. "Let me be *George* or anything else you like to *you*."

"Dear, dear George," said Ernestina, pressing her lips to his own. "But I will not weary you with a long story. You are aware that Dysart killed Sefton in a duel——"

"And he was condemned to death yesterday," exclaimed the Prince. "But what was that paper which I signed——"

"Here it is—read it, George," interrupted the lady, producing the document from beneath the cushion of a sofa, and displaying it to the view of his Royal Highness.

The Prince, suffering his curiosity to distract him for a few moments from his dream of voluptuous bliss, took the paper and read it. But when he found that it was in fact an acknowledgment on his part of a criminal correspondence with Lady Ernestina Dysart, and a solemn undertaking to grant a free pardon to her husband, whatever sentence a criminal tribunal might pass upon him,—a feeling of indignation sprang up in his soul—and turning his eyes reproachfully upon his fair companion, he said, "And you were a party to this precious document?"

"Hear me, Prince—hear me, dearest George—and do not prejudge me!" she exclaimed, redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses, and immediately bringing all the wanton witcheries of seductive artifice to play their artillery upon him again.

"But let us first destroy this paper, my love," said the Prince: "that is, if you really have any regard and affection for me."

"Destroy it if you will," observed Ernestina, her manner suddenly changing into coldness "but in that case I shall be ruined, and you will be exposed."

"What mean you? Speak!" cried the Prince.

"If the paper be destroyed, Dysart will proclaim to the world all that occurred at Beechey Manor," responded the lady. "Thus my reputation will be wrecked—and your's will sustain no advantage."

"But do you wish me to comply with the guarantee contained in this document?" demanded the bewildered Prince: "do you wish me to exercise my prerogative as Regent and grant a free pardon to your husband? I thought you said just now that you hated, loathed, and abhorred him——"

"And I repeat those expressions now," exclaimed Ernestina. "Yes—I hate, loath, and abhor him: and it is precisely because I wish to leave him to his doom, that I enjoin you not to destroy that paper, but on the contrary help me in deluding and beguiling the wretched man to the very last. By so doing, he will retain our secret—he will not be goaded by rage or despair to proclaim it to the world—and neither your reputation nor my own need suffer."

"But what purposes have you in view, Ernestina?—and how do you propose to carry out your aims?" asked the Prince, now beginning to comprehend the wily lady's meaning.

"Listen attentively," she said, throwing her arms about his neck and drawing him towards her in such a manner that his ear came close to her lips: and then she whispered long and earnestly.

"Yes—it can be managed in that way—and it must be done so," said the Prince, in a musing tone, when she had ceased speaking. "But have you the nerve—the tact—the courage to carry out the plan to the very last moment?"

"By all the wrongs I have sustained at his hands," returned the lady, in a low voice that was full of concentrated bitterness, "I swear that I am as remorseless in my vengeance as I am capable of being fervid, enthusiastic, and devoted in love."

"I believe you, dearest Ernestina—I believe you," said the Prince, now again melting beneath the influence of her blandishments. "And remember, I trust entirely to you—I confide in you altogether——"

"My love towards you is the proof of my sincerity," murmured the lady, redoubling the ardour of her caresses and exciting the Prince to tender dalliance.

"Well, let me write what you require upon the margin of that document," he said; "and then, as I ere now observed, we can talk of love—and only of love."

Thus speaking, the Prince rose and placed himself at a table on which there were writing-materials.

"Now dictate to me, my charming preceptress, what I am to say," he observed, taking up a pen and preparing to write.

"Let the annotation run thus," said Ernestina, bending over him, with one arm thrown about his neck:—'*I have re-perused this paper and reiterate the promise made therein.*' Now affix the date and your signature. That will do."

"Well, it is done—and I am glad of it," observed the Prince. "You do not know how I hate trouble of any kind. I was formed and fashioned to spend my existence pleasurably, and not in the routine of business and serious affairs. Come, put away that document, Ernestina—and tell me once more that you are really and truly very fond of me."

The lady locked up the paper in the drawer of a *cheffonier* standing in one of the window recesses, and then took her seat upon a sofa, the Prince placing himself by her side. At the same instant his looks fell upon the door communicating with the mysterious suite of apartments: and, as a train of recollections associated therewith gushed through his memory, he said, "Ernestina my darling, have you ever been in those rooms?"

"Never," she replied. "They are my uncle's private apartments—and he does not allow any one save his valet Stephen Brockman and the housekeeper to enter them."

"And have you never been inspired with curiosity sufficient to induce you to explore those

forbidden regions?" asked the royal voluptuary, now seized with an ardent longing to witness the effect of the gallery's contents upon Ernestina, whose passions he hoped to see flame up to a maddening pitch.

"To speak candidly," she replied, "I *have* wished to penetrate into the secrets of those apartments: but I have never found an opportunity. The door has always been locked——"

"Ah! you little vixen," exclaimed the Prince, patting her cheek: "you have tried the door, then?"

"Do you not know that woman's curiosity is as great as her capacity for love?" said Ernestina, laughing. "But have you ever visited those apartments—you, who are so intimate with my uncle?"

"I have, dearest Ernestina," responded the Prince: "and I can assure you that they contain the choicest specimens of statuary and painting. Ah! how I should rejoice to become your guide there!"

"It is impossible," said Ernestina, rising from the sofa and trying the door. "You perceive it is locked—and I dare not ask Brockman for the keys, even if my uncle had left them in his possession," she added, returning to her seat.

"Are you not aware that there is a secret entrance from the dressing-room of the Marquis?" inquired the Prince: then, without waiting for an answer, he exclaimed, "But of course you are not—otherwise you would long ago have obtained access to the apartments by that means of communication."

"No doubt," exclaimed Ernestina, laughing, and displaying the rows of pearl which embellished her mouth. "I will not affect a virtue which I do not possess: and now that you have raised my curiosity, you shall indeed become my guide and companion in a visit to those rooms. But wait an instant, while I assure myself that the coast is clear."

Thus speaking, the lady again started from her seat by the Prince's side, and went to look forth upon the landing. No one was there—and she beckoned his Royal Highness to follow hastily. He at once obeyed—and they passed together into her uncle's bed-chamber. This they traversed and entered the dressing-room: but Ernestina saw no trace of a door in the wall which separated that dressing-room from the private suite of apartments.

"You are more puzzled than if you were wildered in the maze at Hampton Court," cried the Prince, laughing: then, having pressed his lips upon her fair shoulder as he threw his arm for a moment round her waist, he said, "Look here."

Thus speaking, he pressed his thumb upon a particular spot on the paper—and a door immediately flew open. Bounding past the Prince, Ernestina sped into the room thus revealed to her: but a cry of mingled amazement and alarm burst from her lips, as her eyes encountered the never-to-be-forgotten face of Daniel Coffin the Hangman.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE PRISONER IN THE CHAIR.

At that ejaculation of terror, the Prince sprang forward from the dressing-room, just in time to catch Lady Ernestina Dysart in his arms as she was recoiling from the hideous spectacle of that man whom she never saw nor thought of without associating him with the ghastly horrors of death and the grave: for the incidents of the night at the Blackheath villa were impressed on her brain as indelibly as if seared there with a red-hot iron.

"Who the devil is this fellow?" exclaimed the Prince, the moment his looks lighted upon the Hangman: but the next instant he burst out into such an uncontrollable fit of laughter that all Ernestina's terror vanished, and she glanced again towards the object of her aversion in order to discover the cause of her royal companion's sudden jocularity.

And now she saw what she had not at first perceived—namely, the ignominious as well as ludicrous manner in which Daniel Coffin was held captive in the chair: and a smile wavered upon her beauteous lips, despite the abhorrence and loathing which she entertained for that man. The whole truth flashed to her comprehension in a moment: for she was not so innocent nor so inexperienced as to remain long in doubt as to the real uses which that treacherous chair was intended to serve:—and it likewise struck her that the Hangman, instead of leaving the house on the preceding evening, had stolen up into this suite of apartments and had fallen into a trap which her precious uncle was wont to set for a fairer and lovelier prey than that which it had now caught.

On his side, the Hangman had instantaneously recognised the Prince Regent, whose person was no stranger to him: and, momentarily aghast with dismay, the wretch sate glaring wildly on his Royal Highness. But speedily recovering his wonted presence of mind—especially when he saw that the Prince treated the affair as such a capital joke—he growled forth, "Well, can't you release a poor devil? I have been fast here ever since ten o'clock last night!"

"Oh! the fellow will kill me—positively kill me with laughing!" cried the Prince, actually writhing with paroxysms of mirth as he leant against the wall for support, while the tears streamed down his cheeks now purple from the same cause. "Oh! this is too good—too rich! Ernestina, why don't you enjoy it as I do?"

"Enjoy it, by goles!" growled the Hangman, savagely. "I don't think your Royal Highness would enjoy it very much either! It's no joke to pass a night locked up in an infernal chair that is worse than the stocks, barring the pelting of the rotten eggs."

"Well, I never laughed so much in all my life!" exclaimed the Prince, the humorous fit now gradually subsiding: then, as he closed the door opening from the dressing-room, he said, "Ernestina, do you know our captive friend here? I can't congratulate him upon the pleasantness of his aspect—and if men's countenances were to be taken as bail, I am very sure his would never be accepted."

"No—I am quite ignorant who he is," said Lady Dysart, making Coffin a rapid sign not to contradict the assertion thus boldly ventured. "But I dare say he has found his way into the house on some love-adventure with one of the female-servants," she added, thus furnishing him with a ready excuse to account for his presence there.

"Egad, ma'am, you're quite right," exclaimed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "It was just as you say—and the girl deluded me into this place where she very politely asked me to be seated—and lo and behold! I was lumbered and limboed in a jiffey. But I'll be even with her yet, the hussey! Only, I hope you won't make no noise about it."

"Rest assured on that head," Ernestina hastened to reply. "But on your part, you will never betray what you have experienced or seen within these walls?"

"I don't want to be laughed at for a fool, ma'am," responded Coffin; "and therefore I shall keep a still tongue in my head. But pray release me."

"In a moment—all in good time!" exclaimed the Prince, still with a smile upon his countenance as he surveyed the man who cut such a piteous figure with his looks made haggard by a night of restlessness and whose aspect was not improved by his matted hair and unshaven chin. "Now, is it really possible," continued his Royal Highness, "that any girl in the service of Lord Leveson took a fancy to so singular a gentleman as you are?"

"She pretended to, at all events," replied Coffin: "but don't you see, it was only to amuse herself by enticing me into this trap."

"And right well must she have been amused, too," rejoined the Prince, still with a bantering tone. "But do you know, my good fellow, that if any one asked me seriously and solemnly to guess who you are, I could not possibly fall back upon any other hypothesis than that you are Jack Ketch."

"And by Satan!" exclaimed Coffin, with another grim smile, "your Royal Highness wouldn't be far short of the mark—and that's plain enough!"

"Heavens! don't talk so horribly," cried Ernestina, becoming very pale.

"Well, ma'am," continued Coffin, "the Prince wants to know who I am—and as I am very certain he won't betray me, I tell him candidly and openly that I *am*—or at least *was*—Jack Ketch, until that cursed affair down at Mrs. Owen's——"

"Ah! is this possible?" ejaculated the Prince, who at first thought the fellow was joking when he acknowledged himself to be the Public Executioner: and the countenance of his Royal Highness now became suddenly stern and severe.

"Let us liberate him and send him about his business," said Ernestina, catching the Prince by the arm and gazing on him with a look of entreaty.

"Yes—and the sooner he gets out of my sight, the better," exclaimed George. "But, no!" he suddenly ejaculated, as a thought flashed to his mind. "This fellow may be of service to us," he added, in a musing tone: then, drawing Ernestina to the farther end of the room, he said in a low whisper, "With this scoundrel's co-operation, our plans relative to Dysart would be made secure and safe enough!"

"I at once fathom your meaning," responded the lady, likewise lowering her voice to a scarcely audible whisper: "but would you trust him?"

"And why not?" asked the Prince. "He would not dare betray us, because he must know full well that not a human being would believe him, and that he would be treated as a Bedlamite. Besides, gold purchases the secrecy even of such ruffians as this——"

"True! But he is no longer the agent of the law—he has ceased to occupy his loathsome office," observed the lady. "For, if I be not mistaken, he is the wretch who shot Mrs. Owen's footman—and therefore he himself has become amenable to the law."

"Ah! I did not think of *that* at the moment," said the Prince. "But at all events, let us question the villain and ascertain what his position and prospects really are. One never knows what loopholes such scoundrels have to creep out of. In any case there is no harm in questioning him: it will only be at the expense of remaining a few minutes longer in his precious company."

With this resolve the Prince turned again towards the Hangman, who had awaited in some degree of suspense the result of the whispered colloquy between his Royal Highness and Ernestina. As for the lady herself, it was with evident reluctance that she again accosted the Hangman: nor did she much admire the prospect of falling even more deeply into that ruffian's power than she already was.

"Now tell me," said the Prince, leaning against the secret door of the dressing-room, and fixing his eyes searchingly upon the Hangman, "what prospect you have of ever getting out of the scrape into which your crimes have plunged you."

"First tell me," exclaimed Coffin, "what motive you have in asking."

"No unfriendly one," replied the Prince. "You are well aware that it does not suit my purpose to hand you over to the grasp of justice: *that* calculation you have already revolved in your mind—and therefore you need no assurances from my lips upon the point. But I have a particular reason for wishing to know whether you entertain any hopes of being shortly restored to the very pleasant and agreeable office which you are compelled, it appears, temporarily to vacate."

"Does your Royal Highness mean the post of Jack Ketch?" inquired Coffin, more and more amazed at the turn the conversation was taking.

"To be sure I do!" exclaimed the Prince. "Come—speak out, man: you *know* I can't—or rather won't do you any harm—whereas," he added, more deliberately, "I may do you some good."

"Ah! that's different," said Coffin, his looks now brightening up. "Well, my lord—or Royal Highness—I'll explain to you exactly the predicament I stand in. You see I'm now playing at hide-and-seek—afraid to go near my own house——"

"And therefore you take up your quarters in other people's," added the Prince, drily. "But go on. I suppose you are afraid of being arrested?"

"Just so," observed the Hangman: "and there is but two chances of my ever being comfortable again. One is the death of my sworn enemy, Larry Sampson——"

"That is the famous Bow Street officer—eh?" said the Prince.

"Lor', how your Royal Highness does know

everything!" exclaimed Coffin. "One would really think you'd been a gonnoff or cracksman* yourself in your day—and perhaps you would too, if you hadn't been born a Prince."

"Well, go on," said his Royal Highness, who could not help smiling at the conceit. "You have told me one of your chances of getting what you call comfortable again: now tell me the other."

"It is just this," rejoined Daniel Coffin,—"that if so be there's a man to hang some fine Monday morning, and no one to hang him, the sheriff will make proclamation of free pardon to any enterprising individual, no matter what his crimes may have been, who shall step for'ard and offer himself for the dooty."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Prince, with a rapid glance of intelligence at Ernestina. "Then you really do expect that sooner or later you may resume your favourite post——"

"If it wasn't an unpleasant subject, Prince," said the Hangman, looking towards the lady in a meaning manner, "I might perhaps let you into the real secret of my hopes on the point we are discussing."

"Do not mind me," observed Ernestina. "Speak candidly and openly to his Royal Highness, whatever you may have to say:"—and she walked towards the end of the room, still however remaining within ear-shot, as the chamber has already been described as of narrow dimensions.

"Well, then, since I am to speak out, I will," continued Daniel Coffin, fully convinced in his own mind that all this questioning did not arise from mere curiosity alone on the part of the Prince, but was connected with the topic of his recently-whispered colloquy with Ernestina, whatever that topic might have been. "The fact is, your Royal

* Thief or burglar.

Highness, Mr. Dysart will have to figure at Tuck-up Fair next Monday week, if so be your Royal Highness doesn't mean to let him off. And somehow or another a little bird whispers in my ears that you *won't* let him off——"

"Ah!" cried the Prince—and the ejaculation was echoed, but in a lower tone, by Lady Ernestina Dysart. "What makes you assume *that*, fellow?" he demanded sternly.

"Oh! simply because I see your Royal Highness and her ladyship on such very comfortable terms together," replied the Hangman,—"coming into this pleasant range of apartments, for instance—very likely to take a peep into yonder gallery—and at all events whispering together, exchanging sly glances, and seeming on such capital terms that a husband is better out of the way in such a case."

As Coffin thus spoke, Ernestina turned aside her countenance that was crimsoning with mingled indignation and shame: but it did not strike her that it was her own fault if the ruffian thus were enabled to allude with coarse flippancy to her amour with the Prince. As for her royal paramour himself, he was for a moment inclined to give way to his anger at the fellow's remarks: but perceiving that any display of wrath would be alike useless and ridiculous, he bit his lip and held his peace.

"So you observe," continued the Hangman, "that I'm rather a far-seeing covey after my own fashion: and to return to what I was saying, I'm now in hope that, if so be Mr. Dysart should be tucked up next Monday week, I may have the opportunity of getting a free pardon and going home all comfortable again to my crib in Fleet Lane, where I shall be happy to shave your Royal Highness any day for nothing."

"And such is your hope," said the Prince, in a musing tone: "and you expect it will be gratified on Monday week. Now, can you keep a secret?—and do you want to earn a couple of hundred guineas?"

"Yes, to both questions," replied the Hangman, joyfully.

"Ernestina," said the Prince, "retire into that room, and close the door. I would rather speak to this man alone. It must only be painful to your feelings," he added, in a whisper, as he conducted the lady into the luxuriously furnished apartment which has already been described as forming the first of the suite.

Ernestina accordingly remained in this room while the Prince concluded his discourse with Daniel Coffin. What farther passed between them, we need not now relate: suffice it to say that having been closetted alone with the Hangman for upwards of ten minutes, his Royal Highness returned to the lady in the apartment to which he had conducted her.

"Well, my angel, it is all right," he said, in a low mysterious tone, as he closed the door behind him. "The fellow has entered into my views—and I am glad that the thought struck me."

"But where is he?—have you released him from the chair?—is he gone?" demanded Ernestina, trembling with the excitement into which the prolonged train of incidents had thrown her.

"The rascal could not very well leave the house in broad day-light," said the Prince,—"to be stopped by your servants as a prowling robber, or to be snapped up by some constable or informer in the streets. No—he must remain here until dusk. I have liberated him from the chair—and he is busy in devouring a quantity of biscuits with which his pocket is crammed. But you look pale—ill——"

"I shall be better presently, my dearest George," answered Ernestina, with a fond look. "But let us leave these apartments and return to the Drawing-room. We have already been too long away—and if any of the servants should have entered during our absence, what must they have thought?"

"That I know how to appreciate the beauties of an angel!" replied the Prince, caressing her. "We will return to the Drawing-room since you desire it: but we must retrace our way through your uncle's chambers——"

"By what means did that dreadful man obtain access to these rooms, I wonder?" said Ernestina, the thought now striking her for the first time.

"By aid of a skeleton-key, he tells me," answered the Prince: "and I have no doubt his intention was to rob the house. But we will not trouble ourselves any more about him: he will be useful to us—and that is sufficient. Come—let us retrace our way to the Drawing-room."

The Prince accordingly led Ernestina back into the adjoining apartment, where the Hangman was now walking to and fro to stretch his limbs, which were horribly cramped by his long prisonage in the treacherous chair. Opening the secret door by pressing his hand on one of the roses that formed the pattern of the paper, his Royal Highness and Ernestina once more gained the dressing-room. The secret door was carefully closed again; and from the dressing-room they passed into the bed-chamber.

But, to tell the truth, they paused there awhile: and nearly another half-hour elapsed ere they returned into the Crimson Drawing-room. Then the lady's cheeks were flushed and her eyes swam in a softly sensuous languor—while the countenance of the Prince was radiant with satisfaction and triumph. Alas! Venetia was still forgotten by the royal voluptuary!

"Farewell for the present, my charmer," he said, straining Ernestina to his breast. "We shall soon meet again—the sooner the better!"

"*That* depends entirely on yourself, my dear George," whispered the lady, in her soft musical tones and with a look that was in itself a whole world of blandishments.

The Prince now took his departure—and Ernestina, having ordered the carriage, ascended to her own chamber to dress for going out.

CHAPTER LXIII.

NEWGATE.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, as a beautiful girl, seventeen years of age and neatly though plainly dressed, reached the visitors' gate at Newgate. Her countenance was pale as marble—her eyes were somewhat red with weeping—and the nervous quivering of her lips showed how strong and painful were the efforts which she made to crush

and stifle the grief that was swelling so agonisingly in her bosom. Her slight form was modelled to the most graceful symmetry: innocence shed its soft halo even upon her profoundly mournful looks;—her retiring, timid, and bashful manner unmistakably denoted the purity of her mind.

Ascending the steps leading to the gate, or half-door, surmounted with its bristling fringe of iron spikes, her looks plunged affrightedly and recoilingly into the dark gloomy vestibule within: and the next moment a turnkey looked over the well-guarded barrier.

"What is it, young o'oman?" he said, in a short surly tone—for he was discussing his dinner and a pot of porter at the moment of her arrival.

"I believe—I am afraid," she answered tremulously and timidly, "that a young gentleman named Theodore Varian has been brought hither this forenoon——"

"We've no young genelmen here, Miss," said the turnkey, gruffly. "A young *man* has been brought in this mornin', committed by the Lord Mayor for trial——"

"May I see him?" asked the girl, the syllables which formed the request seeming as if they issued from a breaking heart. "He is my brother:"—and she burst into tears.

"Well, I'm sorry to be obleeged to refuse you, my dear," said the turnkey, somewhat softened: "but it's after the 'ours for wisitors, and its agin the rules to let anybody enter now. I'm wery sorry, I say—but you must come to-morrow mornin' at eleven o'clock."

"Oh! can you not let me see my poor brother—if only for a moment?" asked Ariadne Varian, in a voice that was convulsed with bitter, bitter anguish.

"It can't be done, Miss," said the turnkey: "but you can ax the guv'ner. Go on a little further, and ascend them steps which leads to the door of his house."

Then, having waved a huge key in the direction to which he had alluded, the man disappeared from the gate—and poor Ariadne, hastily wiping her eyes, passed along the front of the frowning prison until she reached the door of the governor's dwelling. The knock which she gave was low and timid—for there was in her soul a sense of such deep, deep humiliation, that it seemed to her as if her prayer would only be granted by a display of abject servility on her part, and that even too loud a knock would ensure a refusal. Alas! this poor young girl was already doomed, at so tender an age, to experience the degradation which even innocence feels when visiting the abode of the criminal!

A woman-servant answered the door—and the instant Ariadne began to make known her business, the governor himself issued forth from an office close by.

"I'm sorry I can't help you, young woman," he said: "but it is altogether against the rules to admit a visitor after the proper hours. It is more than I dare do. You must come to-morrow morning. But what case is it?"

"I am the sister of Theodore Varian, sir," replied Ariadne, again bursting into tears, and leaning against the entrance for support.

"Ah! I recollect," cried the governor. "Committed just now from the Mansion House—eh? Embezzlement and fraud—my friend Emmerson the prosecutor? Ah! young woman, it is a bad case: your brother should have known better. There, now—don't cry like this—people will think I am ill-using you, perhaps. Come to-morrow at eleven."

With these words the governor closed the door of his house—and Ariadne turned slowly away from the prison, weeping as if her heart would break.

A few minutes afterwards a carriage dashed up to the governor's dwelling; and a livery servant, leaping down from behind, gave a long thundering knock which raised every echo in the Old Bailey. The front-door was thrown open — the governor himself rushed down the steps—and, assisting Lady Ernestina Dysart to alight, he conducted her with the profoundest manifestations of respect into his own drawing-room.

"I wish to see my unhappy husband," said the lady, assuming an air of intense affliction.

"Well, your ladyship, it is a *leetle* after the usual hours," observed the governor, with his blandest tone and utmost suavity of manner: "but of course I could not for a moment think of enforcing the gaol-regulations in respect to your ladyship. Will your ladyship see Mr. Dysart in this apartment?"

"No, sir, I thank you," responded Ernestina. "It is in the gloom and dreariness of his own cell that he requires consolation—and thither I shall trouble you to conduct me. But I may as well inform you," she added, with a mysterious look, "that I cherish every hope of obtaining a reprieve and a pardon for my unfortunate husband."

"I am delighted to hear it, my lady," exclaimed the governor. "It is indeed an affair demanding the exercise of the royal prerogative of mercy," added this gentleman who a few minutes before had pronounced Varian's case to be so very black. "Is there anything I can do to cheer Mr. Dysart's spirits—anything your ladyship can suggest?"

"I thank you most sincerely," answered Ernestina, with a smile so gracious and condescending that it quite ravished the governor, who was one of those persons that consider the favour of aristocracy to be an inestimable benefit, and who would sooner lose their ears or their eyes than incur the displeasure of this said aristocracy. "Yes—I think you can do something to cheer poor Dysart," continued the lady: "and I shall not forget to mention your kindness in terms of gratitude to my uncle the Marquis of Leveson."

"What can I do to oblige your ladyship?" asked the governor, now lifted up to the seventh heaven of delight.

"You may cheer my poor husband's spirits from time to time by assuring him that he is certain of a reprieve and eventual pardon," continued Lady Ernestina Dysart. "He will be more tranquillised and more confident by receiving such assurances from your lips, because he may fancy that when coming from me they are rather the expression of what I hope and desire than what I am certain of. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, my lady," replied the obsequious governor. "I will seek every opportunity to visit Mr. Dysart for a few moments, and will hint my conviction that he has nothing to apprehend, but everything to hope."

"You may do this with the greatest confidence, I can assure you," said Ernestina, inwardly rejoicing at the ease with which the man's sycophancy made him her tool in the matter: then, appa-

rently in quite a casual way, she observed, "I can only say, my dear sir, that Lord Leveson will always be most happy to see you in Albemarle Street, and that henceforth no guest will be received at his table with a more cordial welcome than yourself."

The governor was now so enchanted that he knew not whether he was standing upon his head or his heels; and he literally confounded himself in bowings and scrapings. Ernestina rose from the chair which she had taken on entering the room; and the obsequious governor forthwith conducted her to the cell in which her husband was confined. He then withdrew—and Ernestina remained alone in the company of Paul Dysart.

"What intelligence have you for me?" he demanded with breathless impatience.

"Good," she replied: then taking from about her person a document which her husband instantaneously recognised, she pointed to some writing on the margin, saying "Read this!"

Dysart's looks at once settled with all the avidity of suspense upon the writing thus indicated; and when he beheld that solemn recognition of the pledge contained in the document, with the Prince's signature affixed thereto, he exclaimed in a joyous tone, "Thank heaven! I am saved!"

"Yes—you have now nothing to dread, Paul," said Ernestina, appearing to participate in his enthusiastic delight. "The Prince was with me for an hour this morning—and he did not hesitate to pen of his own accord that annotation on the margin of the paper. But he nevertheless feels that the matter is a delicate one, and must be managed with tact and judgment, so as to prevent the public mind from being outraged by a leniency which is not warranted by the circumstances. These are the Prince's own words: and he has accordingly hit upon a plan——"

"And that plan?" exclaimed Dysart, impatiently.

"I will explain it to you," said Ernestina, with a winning air of apparent sincerity, all the more deeply simulated in proportion to the ticklish nature of the ground upon which she was touching. "The Prince's idea is that things must be left to take their usual course until the very last moment——"

"Ah! I understand you," interrupted Dysart, becoming ghastly pale. "He means to treat me like one of those common malefactors who are made to ascend even the very platform of the scaffold before the reprieve is produced!"

"Do not be impatient—and do not give way to passionate feelings," said Ernestina, as she again secured the document about her person. "The Prince has desired me to submit two alternatives to your consideration. The first is that you receive a respite at once, and this to be followed by a commutation of the sentence to three years' imprisonment in Newgate: the other is that you receive the respite on the scaffold, and this to be followed by a free pardon within a day or two. In either case appearances will be saved, and the public will have no room to suspect that any private influences or intrigues of an extraordinary nature have been brought to bear upon the mind of the Prince Regent."

"Yes—I see the difficulty in which he is placed," said Dysart; "and I was not altogether unprepared for something of this sort. Well, the alternatives do not require a moment's reflection: I accept the latter, as being the shortest though the most painful ordeal. As for remaining cooped up in this infernal prison for three years, I'd sooner be hanged straight off at once. And, after all, there's no great harm in mounting the steps of a gibbet when one knows that the sheriff has got the reprieve in his pocket."

"This is the course I should have recommended, had you asked my advice," said Ernestina: "because in ten days all will be over, and you will be free again."

"And then we will return to the Continent, or go anywhere you like," observed Dysart, anxious to show a conciliatory spirit towards his wife, for he more than suspected that the Prince had exacted from her certain favours as the reward of the acknowledgment written on the margin of the document. "What do you say, Ernestina?"

"Oh! by all means let us repair to France, at least for a time!" she exclaimed, appearing to catch with avidity at the proposal. "You have plenty of ready money in your possession—and I shall manage to get a thousand or two from my uncle."

"So much the better. By the bye, what did the Prince say when he found that the heroine of his midnight adventure and Lady Ernestina Dysart were one and the same person?"

"If I told you that he was very sorry to meet me again, I should deceive you, Paul," she responded, with an arch look. "Personally, I hate and detest him—but I was prepared to make any sacrifice for your sake. However, do not let us talk upon that subject. You must now keep up your spirits as well as you can——"

"Oh! I shall be happy enough, my dear," exclaimed her husband. "Are you to see the Prince again shortly?"

"Yes—in a day or two," she replied. "He made me promise——"

"That's right!" observed Dysart. "Stick close to him. Not that he can possibly fly from his word——"

"He would not have ratified the document if such had been his intention," Ernestina hastened to answer. "But I can tell you something more, Paul——"

"What is it?" he demanded eagerly.

"The Prince has promised that a private intimation shall be sent to the governor to the effect that the extreme sentence of the law is not to be carried out in your case: and his object in doing this is that the governor himself may give you a secret assurance of your eventual safety."

"Ah! now the last remaining scintillation of uneasiness has become extinguished in my mind!" exclaimed Dysart, rubbing his hands joyously. "Upon my word, my dear Ernestina, you have managed all this admirably—and my future conduct shall show my gratitude towards you."

The lady embraced her husband, and then took her departure. Returning to the governor's room, she again thanked this functionary for his courtesy and kindness; and entering the carriage, drove home to Albemarle Street, rejoicing at the success of her interview with Dysart and the security of mind into which she had so completely but so artfully lulled him.

In the course of the afternoon the governor visited the prisoner's cell; and having inquired with all possible respect and courtesy after his health, he said, "I think, Mr. Dysart, that I shall not exceed the bounds of duty by dropping a hint that may serve to tranquillise your mind."

"You are very good, my dear sir," exclaimed the prisoner. "And this hint——"

"Is to the effect that you need not apprehend a *very* severe carrying out of the law," responded the governor, with a knowing look. "The fact is, sir, I am a little in the confidence of certain persons high in authority——"

"Ah! I understand," said Dysart, seeing in this mysterious hint on the governor's part the realization of the announcement made to him by his wife. "It has been whispered to you that a reprieve and pardon may be confidently relied upon!"

"Hush!" observed the governor, placing his finger to his lip in a meaning manner.

"Say no more!" exclaimed Dysart, joyfully. "I understand you, sir."

"But not a word to the turnkeys—not a word even to your friends," said the governor; "for this is of the nature of a State secret, Mr. Dysart—and if I have ventured to drop a hint, it is because I do not like to see you linger in suspense."

Thus speaking, the governor withdrew—and Mr. Paul Dysart sate down to his dinner as pleasantly and as comfortably as if his pardon had already been proclaimed to the world.

Meantime Lady Ernestina had returned home to Albemarle Street: and *she* also enjoyed her dinner that day with as much zest as her husband experienced in Newgate. At about nine o'clock in the evening Mr. Lawrence Sampson was announced; and the lady received him with her wonted affability.

"Sit down, Mr. Sampson," she said, with a gracious stoop from the pedestal of her aristocratic hauteur,—"and take a glass of wine. I have seen my poor husband to-day, and broke to his ears the matter which you mentioned to me last evening. I assured him that if he had really indulged in any love-affair or amorous intrigue unknown to me, I would freely and cordially forgive him; and I besought him to tell me the truth for the sake of Mr. Malvern, who was inconsolable on account of his father's still unexplained and unaccountable disappearance. But Mr. Dysart assured me that he had no reason to suspect any female of treachery towards him. I then showed him the anonymous letter which had given the information leading to his arrest—but he did not recognise the handwriting. His manner corroborated his words. I have therefore done all I could for you in the affair, Mr. Sampson—and in one sense I am sorry that the result is not more favourable to Mr. Malvern's hopes of discovering a clue to his father's fate; while, on the other hand, I rejoice that my husband has proved guiltless of any unworthy treatment calculated to evoke a female's vengeance."

"I thank your ladyship for the trouble you have taken in the matter," said the officer. "Would you have the kindness to give me back the anonymous letter? It may serve on some future occasion——"

"I have locked it up in my writing-desk, Mr. Sampson," observed the lady, with the most perfect self-possession, although, as the reader will recollect, she had consigned the document to the flames: "but the desk is up-stairs in the drawing-room, and I will fetch you the note," she added, rising from her seat.

"I could not think of giving your ladyship so much trouble," exclaimed Sampson. "Perhaps you will have the goodness to remit the letter to me by post at your ladyship's convenience?"

"Most assuredly, Mr. Sampson," said Ernestina: then, so soon as Larry had taken his leave, she murmured to herself, "Ah! even the cunning Bow Street officer is made a dupe by me!"

Lounging in an arm-chair drawn near the fire in the dining-room, Ernestina sate meditating upon her various schemes and plots until past eleven o'clock: then, so soon as the domestics had retired for the night, she proceeded to assist Mr. Daniel Coffin in taking his departure from the mansion. Entering her uncle's dressing-room, she opened the door by means of the secret spring; and the Hangman instantaneously came forth from the apartment which was furnished with the luxurious sofas, he having experienced no inclination to entrust himself again to either of the arm-chairs in the central room of the suite.

Guided by Ernestina, Coffin descended the stairs on tip-toe—and when they reached the hall, he said in a low tone and with a cunning leer, "Ah! my lady, your friend the Prince is a precious rum customer. He's down to a dodge or two, he is!"

"But he pays well those who serve him," replied Ernestina, with a look of deep meaning: "and he is remorseless in his vengeance against those who deceive him."

"I shall be one of them that he pays well, ma'am," answered Coffin.

He then stole out of the house;—and Ernestina, infinitely relieved by the departure of a man whose looks always produced upon her the impression of a hideous reptile's gaze, tripped up-stairs to her own chamber.

But as she passed the door of her uncle's room, she was seized with a sudden inclination to return into the mysterious suite of apartments and explore them fully. The deep silence that prevailed through the mansion, struck however ominously to her soul: and, continuing her way to her own room, she decided upon postponing the gratification of her curiosity until another occasion.

CHAPTER LXIV.

A CHAPTER TO WHICH WE CAN GIVE NO TITLE.

It was nine o'clock on the Monday evening which Venetia had named for her appointment with the Prince Regent; and his Royal Highness sate alone in a small but sumptuously-furnished room at Carlton House. A side-door communicated with a bed-chamber, which was fitted up with even a surpassing luxury: but that door was closed for the present.

The Prince reclined upon a sofa in the first-mentioned apartment; and he was giving free rein to all the voluptuous thoughts which the image of Venetia could not fail to conjure up in his easily excitable imagination. Within reach of his hand stood a table spread with wines of many exquisite

descriptions and a choice dessert: a cheerful fire blazed in the grate;—the heavy hangings were drawn over the windows—and the atmosphere was warm and perfumed. A lustre suspended to the ceiling diffused a rich and mellow light through the room; and the general aspect of luxurious comfort was enhanced by the velvet drapery which covered the doors—as if not even the faintest thrill of a wintry air should be allowed to penetrate thither!

We said that the Prince was yielding himself up to the pleasures of imagination, as a meet and provocative prelude to the more real joys that were to come. For he had no doubt as to Venetia's keeping her appointment, inasmuch as she had written him a note in the morning reiterating in her own beautiful calligraphy the hurried promise she had made on the evening of the banquet at Colonel Malpas's house.

As he thus reclined upon the sofa, confident in the sincerity of his expected charmer, the Prince insensibly found himself entering into a comparison between her beauty and that of every other lovely female who had submitted to his embraces. Their number was legion, it was true: but still in a rapid survey did he glance at them all—not forgetting Octavia Clarendon, Mrs. Fitzherbert, Lady Letitia Lade, Mrs. Brace the milliner, the Countess of Jersey, and the Duchess of Devonshire;—and he came at length to the conclusion that none was to be compared with Venetia! Nor in this mental review of his almost countless conquests amongst beauties of all grades and ranks—from the Duchess to the milliner, from the Countess to the ballet-dancer, and from the haughtiest dame to the humblest servant-girl,—nor in this category, we say, did he forget to include Miss Bathurst, Agatha Owen, and Lady Ernestina Dysart. He remembered that the first-named had once been eminently beautiful: his mind still retained pleasurable impressions of his amour with Agatha:—but chiefly did his fancy gloat over the superb and voluptuous charms of the impassioned Ernestina. Between this lady, then, and Venetia did he hover in a few moments' uncertainty; his memory comparing their respective charms—the eyes, hair, complexion, and bust of Ernestina, with the eyes, hair, complexion, and bust of Venetia: but at length, as above stated, he gave his decision in favour of the latter. Yes—for about Venetia there was all the first freshness of youth—the bloom upon the peach that has scarcely come in contact with the rude hand of man!

And now, as the image of the beauteous creature had become paramount in his mind, to the exclusion of all the rest, he felt his impatience for her arrival augmenting every instant. He looked at his watch: it was ten minutes past nine—was she not coming? Yes: for scarcely had he asked himself the question, when the door opened from the landing without—the velvet drapery was pushed aside—and Venetia was ushered into his presence. The curtain fell again—the domestic who had escorted her thither, closed the door behind her—and the Prince Regent sprang forward to clasp her in his arms.

Venetia had made her appearance closely veiled and enveloped in an ample cloak, so as to avoid being recognised by the Prince's servants: but she now hastily threw off her bonnet and veil—dropped her cloak—and fell in all the grandeur of her beauty into the outstretched arms of her royal lover.

"Oh! how magnificent you look!" murmured the enraptured Prince, as he conducted her to a seat after fondly and fervidly embracing her: then, placing himself by her side, he contemplated her with the earnest looks of a devouring sensuousness.

As the light shone upon the beauteous creature, enhancing the brilliancy of her charms into positive radiance, she seemed a being of celestial mould and nature. Her very presence was dazzling and overpowering: for every feature and contour appeared to possess its own light,—the lustre of the eyes, the alabaster of the forehead, the vivid redness of the lips, the snowy whiteness of the neck and bosom, and the auburn glory of the hair!

She was dressed in a crimson velvet robe, with a low boddice fitting tight to her shape—and her arms were naked. The gentle agitation which she experienced had deepened the rich bloom upon her cheeks; and altogether she looked so transcendently lovely that the Prince felt as if he could surrender not only his present rank but also the hope of some day wearing the British crown, rather than resign the certainty of possessing her this night!

"Dearest—ever dear Venetia," he said, passing one arm round her neck, and drawing her gently towards him, "is it indeed possible that the happy moment has arrived for me to enjoy your love?—or am I plunged in a delicious dream which is to know the waking of disappointment?"

"Faithful to my promise, I am here," murmured Venetia, in the melting tones of her sweet limpid voice. "Do you remember all the conditions of our compact?"

"You shall recapitulate them, my angel," replied the Prince: "and there is nothing you can demand to which I shall hesitate to assent."

"First and foremost," said Venetia, "it was agreed that I should marry in order to save my reputation—and I have done so."

"Ah! happy Horace Sackville!" exclaimed the Prince. "But tell me, dearest—was he already engaged to you on that day when we agreed that you should marry?"

"Assuredly not," answered Venetia. "But I was aware that he formed one of the party of six who had leagued, or rather wagered in the love-campaign—I likewise knew that he had seen me often and was inspired with an affection for me—and I consequently felt certain that he would accept my hand in marriage."

"But does he know—is he aware——"

"That I am come hither this evening? Yes: before we were married I explained to him that she whom he took as his wife was pledged to become the mistress of the Prince."

"Truly, he must be infatuated with you, my Venetia! But this is not wonderful—thou art the loveliest woman that ever trod upon the earth!"

"O flatterer!" cried Venetia, with playful remonstrance. "But I have before told you how readily and fluently these compliments glide from your tongue."

"By heaven! they are truths when applied to thee!" exclaimed the Prince, first devouring her with his regards and then covering her face, shoulders, and bosom with frenetic kisses. "But

you were recapitulating the terms of our compact? Go on—and let us finish all details savouring of business, that we may devote ourselves wholly and solely to the enjoyments of love."

"It was agreed," continued Venetia, "that you were to find some office for my husband about your royal person, so that we might have a suite of apartments allotted to us at Carlton House."

"To-morrow Horace Sackville shall receive the appointment of Lord Steward of my household," said the Prince. "The post has been vacant for these last ten days—and I cannot more worthily fill it up than by the nomination of my charming Venetia's husband."

"And the name which I bear was also to be gilded with a peerage," murmured Venetia, now displaying all her most winning seductiveness.

"That condition shall likewise be kept, angel that thou art!" cried the Regent, straining her in his arms. "Hast thou aught more to demand?"

"Nothing," responded Venetia, her countenance radiant with joy and triumph.

"And thou art mine?" said the Prince: "tell me that thou art mine!"

"Yes—I am thine," she murmured, her voice suddenly sinking to a dying tone, as her head drooped upon his shoulder and she fell upon his breast.

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It was still dark, at an early hour in the morning, when Venetia stole forth from the private door of Carlton Palace. She was enveloped in her ample cloak and the thick veil was drawn completely over her countenance, so that not even the most prying eye could discover the brilliant heroine of our tale through that deep disguise.

Hurrying to the nearest hackney coach stand, she entered a vehicle and ordered the driver to proceed towards Knightsbridge. When within a short distance of Acacia Cottage, she stopped the coach and descended, performing the rest of the way on foot. Immediately upon reaching her home and tapping gently with her hand at the front-door, it was opened by Horace: and passing in, she stole noiselessly up-stairs, followed by her husband.

The moment they were together in their chamber, and Venetia had thrown aside her bonnet and cloak, she flung a rapid and anxious glance upon her husband, by the light of the candle which was burning upon the toilette-table. She saw that his countenance was very pale, but that he endeavoured to subdue the emotion which he felt: and throwing herself into his arms, she gave vent to a violent fit of weeping.

"For heaven's sake, tranquillise yourself, my dearest Venetia," murmured Horace, in a soothing tone as he strained her to his breast. "These sobs will be overheard—the domestics will soon be about in the house, and they will catch the sounds of your grief."

"But do you not now hate—loathe—and despise me?" asked Venetia, suddenly wiping her eyes and gazing anxiously up into his countenance.

"Do you not hate—loathe—and despise *me* for having permitted this?" he inquired, with some degree of bitterness in his tone. "But let us not enter again, and again, and again upon the discussion of a subject on which we have already talked so seriously and so often—and which indeed," he added, "has now proceeded too far to admit of recall!"

"Yes—but has it left no regret behind, Horace?" asked Venetia.

"In one sense, certainly!" he exclaimed. "But the necessity which has ruled us, was almost as inexorable as destiny itself. Indeed, it *was* our destiny—and therefore regret is useless. Rather let us look to the brightest side——"

"Oh! yes—if you really have the heart to do so!" exclaimed Venetia, joyfully. "Well, our ambition will be gratified—our hopes will be realized—and this day's *Gazette* will elevate you to rank and to honour."

"You are to be a Peeress, then, Venetia!" said Horace, caressing her fondly.

"Yes—because you are to become a Peer," she replied.

"And are we to remove to Carlton House?"

"Immediately. The post of Lord Steward is your's."

"Oh! now you will shine as the most brilliant star in the courtly sphere, my charming Venetia!"

"And you will have an opportunity of shining also, my handsome Horace!"

"These are indeed dazzling and brilliant prospects," exclaimed the young man; "and I suppose it is mortal destiny that no ambition can be accomplished without the sacrifice of some of our best feelings."

"But if we do not lose our love for each other, Horace," said Venetia, "may we not be happy—even though our happiness be purchased by my dishonour?"

"We will *make ourselves happy*," observed the husband, emphatically: but still he sighed as he spoke these words, and the forcefulness of his accentuation was only assumed suddenly to drown that sigh.

Venetia sighed also—for she was not so far tainted with depravity, especially after this her *first* fault, as to be otherwise than keenly sensible of the fact that it was now a polluted woman whom her husband was clasping in his arms. They retired to rest—for it was still too early to go down stairs: and Venetia was glad when the candle was extinguished and she could conceal her countenance from the eyes of Horace—for it was suffused with burning blushes.

But they slept—and at a late hour they rose: and now the first feelings of embarrassment, confusion, and even grief had subsided. They began to look their shame more boldly in the face—and the result was that they could soon look at each other also without blushing. The forbidden fruit was plucked and eaten—they had quitted the paradise of nuptial purity—they now knew all their moral nakedness, and speedily ceased to be ashamed. It appeared as if by a mutual but tacit resolve they had suddenly determined to avoid the topic altogether: and they now looked forward to the happiness that was to be derived from brilliancy of position, rather than from the sweet and unimpaired domesticity of the married state.

Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope were staying with Miss Bathurst in Stratton Street: and thus the newly-married pair had no one to observe the changing condition of their minds. The servants were of course ignorant that Venetia had passed

the greater portion of the night away from home: and thus her honour was likewise safe.

In the course of the day two official documents were delivered at Acacia Cottage. One contained the patent elevating Mr. Horace Sackville to the rank of a Baron of the realm, by the style and title of Lord Sackville: the second appointed him to the post of Lord Steward in the household of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

The entire fashionable world was struck with astonishment at these announcements, when they appeared in the *Gazette:* and there was no difficulty in attributing them to the fact that the newly-created nobleman possessed as his wife the most beautiful woman in England. But scandal dared not raise its voice too loud—much less openly point a scornful finger at Lord and Lady Sackville,—inasmuch as the matrimonial gloss was shed upon whatever amount of frailty there might be in the matter. The consequence was that for several days running Acacia Cottage was crowded with visitors who called to congratulate the noble pair, and the Knightsbridge road was thronged with the carriages of what is called the *elite* of the aristocracy hastening thither to pay their court to the new Lord Steward and the Prince's new mistress.

At the end of the week Horace and Venetia removed to the apartments which had been provided for them in Carlton House,—the faithful Jessica, Plumpstead, and the serious-looking footman still remaining in their service.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE GIBBET.

BETWEEN nine and ten o'clock on Sunday evening several groups of persons began to collect in the Old Bailey, but chiefly in the wide open space opposite Newgate. During the past week the Recorder had made his report to the Prince Regent relative to the state of the prison; and in that report one individual was named as being under sentence of death. In the case of this person it appeared as if the law was to be allowed to take its course: for a warrant had been issued for his execution—and hence the assembling of the groups of idlers on the eve of the fatal Monday!

The person thus alluded to was Paul Dysart.

Chill and misty was this Sunday evening—dark, sombre, and awe-inspiring was the aspect of Newgate through the deepening gloom. Shivering, ragged, half-starved wretches gathered near the debtor's door, whispering, as they pointed to it, "That's the place the man who's to be hung will come out of tomorrow morning!" Others posted themselves on the very spot close by where the scaffold would be placed, saying in subdued voices, "It is just here that the drop will fall beneath his feet!" Farther on, other groups were collected near the entrance of the press-yard, observing amongst themselves, "The gibbet will be wheeled out of this place!" In fact, there was not a scene, a spot, nor a detail connected with the awful tragedy of a public execution, that escaped comment or explanation on the part of the idlers who were already gathering to the theatre of the forthcoming spectacle.

Soon after ten o'clock on this same Sunday evening a private carriage drove up to the *Saracen's Head* on Snow Hill; and six gentlemen alighted.

"You can come for us to-morrow morning at nine o'clock," said one of the party, addressing himself to the livery-servant in attendance upon the carriage.

"Yes my lord," was the reply.

"What makes you say nine, Curzon?" demanded another of the party. "It will be all over at five minutes past eight."

"But we shall stop to see the body cut down after hanging an hour--eh?" exclaimed the Earl.

"Ah! that's different," observed the other. "I forgot this portion of the ceremony," he added coolly as he whiffed his cigar. "To be sure! we won't miss any act in the Newgate drama."

His companions laughed: and as the carriage drove away, they all entered the coffee room of the *Saracen's Head*, cracking jokes and indulging in a variety of witty sayings and repartees as they traversed the inn-yard.

The party consisted of the Earl of Curzon, who is already well known to our readers,—the Honourable George Macnamara and Lieutenant Apsley, both of whom have been previously mentioned,—Lord Plantagenet Tithtide, a young nobleman who had just come of age and just got into the House of Commons for a pocket-borough in the gift of his father, the Duke of Addlebranes,—the Marquis of Brandyford, a peer of the realm, and who infinitely preferred the excitement of wrenching off knockers to taking part in the prosy debates of the Upper House,—and Count d'Orsayville, a foreign adventurer who had worked his way into the very best society, so that he set the fashion for all the male members of the higher class, and was an immense favourite amongst all the ladies of the same sphere. The Count sported a beautiful moustache, was really very handsome, possessed the most fascinating manners, and wore a semi-military cloak the cut of which was the envy of all his male acquaintances.

On entering the coffee-room, this delectable party flung themselves each upon a chair—one yawning, another sprawling out his legs, a third putting *his* legs upon an adjacent table, a fourth laughing heartily at nothing, a fifth uttering an oath by way of amusement (for he had really naught to swear at), and the Earl of Curzon (who made the sixth) ringing the bell so furiously that the wire snapped in twain.

"Now, waiter," said this last-mentioned personage, when the tavern-functionary made his appearance, "we want a private sitting-room for the night."

"Yes, my lord," responded the waiter, to whom the Earl of Curzon was known.

"And no end of whithkey punth," cried Lord Plantagenet Tithtide, who had the misfortune to lisp somewhat—a circumstance which did not disqualify him from becoming a Member of Parliament, because he was a lord.

"And a box of the best cigars, wai-tar!" roared out the Marquis of Brandyford. "Now mind they're good, you unhung scoundrel, you—or, by Jove! I'll punch your head into a jelly for you!"

"And a demn'd good fire bethidth," added Lord Plantagenet. "But don't neglecth the whithkey punth, you pwethiouth wathcal!"

"Vot you call de viskey pohnch vare good—vare good," observed the Count d'Orsayville.

The waiter promised instantaneous compliance with all the instructions he had received; and as he retired from the room the Marquis of Brandyford sent the cushion of a chair spinning after him —but the domestic, who was well on his guard against his lordship's tricks, nimbly avoided the missile. The freak however caused the entire party to laugh immoderately; and Lord Plantagenet Tithtide declared that it was "ekthellenth sporth;" while the Count exclaimed, "Vare good! vare good!"

In the course of half-an-hour the private sitting-room was announced to be in readiness; and thither the aristocratic company repaired, the Marquis of Brandyford tripping up a commercial traveller whom they met upon the stairs, and then gravely apologising to him for the "accidental occurrence." This proceeding excited another burst of uproarious laughter, which was prolonged by the circumstance of the said humorous Marquis kissing an old charwoman of seventy who was clearing away some things upon the landing.

The room to which the waiter escorted the party, was the best in the house: for although the landlord was fully prepared to find everything smashed to pieces in the morning, he was equally aware that his bill for the damage would be liberally paid — and indeed, he was not altogether sorry at the prospect of thus having an opportunity of furnishing that particular apartment anew. A blazing fire roared half-way up the chimney—dessert, wine, and materials for punch were spread upon the table—and a box of cigars likewise greeted the view of the aristocratic convivialists.

"Now we'll make ourselves comfortable till the morning," said the Honourable George Macnamara.

"And I'll brew the punch," exclaimed Lieutenant Apsley, tucking up his coat-sleeves.

"No bwandy nor wum, Apthley, mind!" observed Lord Plantagenet: "only whithkey—and be thure and queeth loth of lemonth."

"I'll be hanged if I'll drink any of your infernal concoctions," vociferated Lord Brandyford. "True to my name, I mean to get as drunk as blazes on brandy."

"Vare good, Markee—vare good!" exclaimed the Count. "You shall have de true English taste. But why for you not have de portare? Wot you call de pot of portare most best for you, Markee, me tink."

"Oh! deuce take the swipes when one means to get jolly," said the Marquis.

"Tho I thay," cried Lord Plantagenet. "You thould wub the lumpth of thugar againth the peel of the lemonth, Apthley. If you don't, you'll not thucktheed in bwewing punth at all dwinkable."

"Leave Apsley to manage it, Tithtide," said the Earl of Curzon. "He always brews for the Guards'-mess—and no one can do it better. I wonder what the devil Dysart is thinking of now. He little suspects that so many of his friends are at hand to see him dance his last fling."

"Vare good! vare good!" ejaculated the Count.

"But if a wepwieve thould come at the lath moment, we thall be mithewably baulked and dithappointed. It would wealy be too bad of Dythart to acthept it after all the twouble we've given ourthelvth."

"Dat vare good, milor—vare good!" cried the Count, almost going into ecstacies.

"I saw the Prince yesterday," said Curzon; "and he assured me that, as the jury did not recommend Dysart to mercy, he had no alternative but to allow the law to take its course."

"Oh! if the Pwinth said that," cried Lord Plantagenet, a considerable weight now taken from his mind, "we are all thafe. I never yet thaw an ekthecuthion, and wouldn't mith the pwethent occathion for a thouthand guineath."

"Vare good!" cried the Count. "'Tis de fine old English custom to hang up as many of de English people as de law shall allow——"

"Ah! we beat you, Count, you see," exclaimed the Marquis of Brandyford, "in our public executions. Give me the excitement of one good hanging-scene in preference to all your guillotining."

"Tho I thay," said the lisping nobleman, who was amazingly fond of hearing himself talk. "But I am athtonithed that the influenth of Lady Ernethtina and the Marquith of Levethon did not thucktheed in getting Dythart off."

"The Marquis hates him," said Curzon. "Moreover, he is on the Continent—and I have no doubt he went thither to be out of the way at the present time."

"Well, I cannot say that I ever liked Dysart much," observed Lieutenant Apsley, as he squeezed the lemons into the punch-bowl. "Besides, that affair with young Sefton was a downright murder."

"To be sure," exclaimed the Honourable George Macnamara: "and he deserves to be hanged for it. But, by the bye, we must tell that scoundrel of a waiter not to go to bed all night, as we shall want breakfast at six or seven o'clock in the morning."

"And let us send him to hire a couple of windows for us exactly facing Newgate," suggested the Marquis of Brandyford.

"Yeth—we muth take care and wetain fwont theath to witneth the performanth," cried Lord Plantagenet.

"Vare good—vare good!" exclaimed the Count.

The waiter was accordingly summoned; and having received his instructions in pursuance of the resolves just adopted, he departed at once to secure a couple of windows at some house fronting the prison. In about ten minutes he returned with the gratifying intelligence that he had succeeded in retaining a first-floor room opposite Newgate, for the moderate sum of ten guineas. This bargain was pronounced "dirt cheap" by the aristocratic band of elegants; and the Marquis of Brandyford flung his purse at the waiter's head, bidding him "go and settle for the room, and keep the rest for himself." The purse hit the waiter upon the right eye, which it completely bunged up: but as the use of the left optic still remained, and as the heaviness of the purse convinced the waiter that it contained a tolerable quantity of golden salve, he took the joke with a proportionate amount of good humour.

But leaving the aristocratic party to the enjoyment of their punch, discourse, and practical freaks, we will penetrate into the prison of Newgate and glance at Mr. Dysart in the condemned cell.

It was now eleven o'clock—and the criminal was alone in that dungeon. Upon the little round table stood a cold fowl and a bottle of wine, to which he was paying his respects with all imaginable ease and comfort: for the nearer the hour approached for him to mount the scaffold, the more joyfully did he look forward to it as the term of the ordeal through which he was passing. In plainer terms, he was so well convinced that the reprieve would be produced the moment the halter was affixed to his neck, and that a free pardon would follow as a matter of course in a few days, that he was actually impatient for the hour which would terminate what he now looked upon as mere "bother, excitement, and annoyance."

Ernestina had visited him daily since his condemnation; and on each occasion she had some new proof to offer of the Prince's kind feelings towards him. Moreover, the governor, entirely misled by her representations and obsequiously anxious to oblige her, had given Dysart the most positive assurances that the sheriff would produce the reprieve upon the scaffold. He had even gone so far as to hint the same to the chaplain; and this reverend gentleman, while discussing a bottle of wine with Mr. Dysart in his cell, had reiterated the governor's assurances. Under all these circumstances, therefore, the prisoner entertained no fear as to the result; and while the gathering crowds in the Old Bailey were observing amongst themselves how dreadful his feelings must be, he was comfortably regaling his appetite on a cold capon and an excellent bottle of sherry.

Having partaken of his supper, Dysart undressed and retired to bed, where he speedily fell into a sound sleep. As the night advanced, the multitudes increased outside the gaol; and at five o'clock in the morning the carpenters made their appearance to erect the barrier around the debtor's door, in order to keep back the pressure of the crowds. Despite the noise of their hammers, the criminal slept on!

At six o'clock the platform of the gallows was wheeled out of the press-yard, and stationed on the

verge of the pavement at the debtor's door. The carpenters then proceeded to fix the ladder and erect the huge beams of the gibbet,—all their operations being viewed with intense curiosity and deep interest by the multitude that was swelling in bulk and volume every moment.

From an early hour a black fellow, roughly dressed and carrying a huge club in his hand, had been lurking near the debtor's door: and when the barrier was put up, he elbowed his way to a place as near that door as possible. There he remained fixed like a statue—leaning with his arms upon the barrier, and neither addressing a word to a soul nor appearing to pay any attention to the discourse that was going on in his hearing.

It was seven o'clock in the morning before Dysart awoke from his slumber: and he would perhaps have slept on, had not the entrance of the chaplain disturbed him. He inquired the hour, and on being informed, was astonished to hear that it was so late.

"You have slept well?" said the chaplain.

"Never better in my life," responded the criminal, gaily. "I will now get up"

"And in ten minutes I will return," said the chaplain.

The reverend gentleman then quitted the cell—and Dysart proceeded to wash and dress himself with as much unconcern as he had displayed when eating his supper over night. On the return of the chaplain, he asked if the sheriff had yet arrived; but the response was in the negative. The Ordinary then hinted that it would be proper for them to join in prayer: but Dysart exclaimed, "You don't think, sir, that it is at all necessary just now—do you?"

"Prayer is always seasonable and of much avail," was the chaplain's response.

"But you feel convinced that I shall be reprieved?" said Dysart, with some little manifestation of uneasiness, or rather perhaps of impatience.

"The governor has assured me that such will be the case," answered the Ordinary, "and I believe him to be far too cautious a man to venture such a statement unless on good authority."

"When the sheriff comes I can ask him," observed Dysart.

"My good friend, that will be a breach of confidence," said the chaplain, in a tone of remonstrance,—"and would probably lead to the loss of our situations for both the governor and myself."

"True! I had forgotten *that!*" exclaimed Dysart. "Will you be so kind as to ask the governor to come to me?"

"Certainly," replied the chaplain: and he once more quitted the cell.

When left alone, Dysart walked backward and forward with a restlessness that he had not before experienced. He endeavoured to shake off the feeling—but it was rapidly growing upon him. Horrible thoughts began to spring up in his mind. What if the Prince should have been playing him false all along—or alter his resolve at the last moment?—what if Ernestina had been deceiving him?—or suppose that every intention and every assurance had been sincere in those quarters, might not the reprieve come too late? These thoughts were dreadful. The unhappy man, hitherto lulled into complete security, had now suddenly awakened as it were to a galling, goading, agonizing sense of the tremendous fact that his life hung to a thread! He would have screamed out,—he could have yelled with mortal anguish: but at the instant the paroxysm reached its crisis, the chaplain returned to the cell, followed by the governor.

The expression of the two functionaries' countenances instantaneously relieved Dysart's awful terrors. The effect was the same as the sudden pouring of oil upon the raging billows: and even before a word was spoken, he felt angry with himself for having yielded to the influence of such agonising alarm.

"Good morning, Mr. Dysart," said the governor, taking him by the hand: then, in a lower voice he added, "A sealed packet from the Home Office, directed to the sheriff, has just arrived. But for heaven's sake do not appear to know this fact: it is as much as my place is worth to have told you."

"Not on any consideration would I injure you, my dear sir," answered Dysart, joyfully pressing the governor's hand, "after all your kindness to me. But is the sheriff come?—has he opened the packet?—does it contain the reprieve?"

"It cannot possibly be anything else," returned the governor. "The sheriff will not be here till a quarter to eight—nor will he open the packet in my presence. I dare not even ask him what it contains: but I have not the slightest—no, not the slightest doubt——"

"What o'clock is it now?" demanded the criminal, hurriedly.

"Half-past seven. Will you take some breakfast? Indeed, you *must* appear as if you anticipated the very worst," said the governor, with marked emphasis.

"Since I have nothing to apprehend, I can assume an air which shall pass for firmness," replied Dysart. "Yes—let me have some breakfast: it will warm me."

Leaving the interior of the prison for a few moments, we will again glance to the aspect of the scene outside.

The morning was dull and gloomy: and soon after the break of day, a fine mizzling rain had begun to fall. The crowd was immense. To the farther extremity of the Old Bailey in the one direction, and to the very verge of Smithfield market on the other, it was a complete ocean of human faces. Men and women—numbers of the latter with young children in their arms,—boys and girls, even of a tender age,—all were packed as densely as the aggregation of such a mass of life could possibly become. Every window and house-top commanding a view of the gaol's front and the looming gallows, had been put into requisition by the anxious spectators. Precisely opposite the gibbet, a first-floor apartment was tenanted for the nonce by the aristocrats who had passed the night at the *Saracen's Head*;—and having well breakfasted off devilled kidneys, coffee, and toast, these worthies found themselves in an excellent humour to *enjoy* the drama about to be enacted.

At a quarter to eight one of the sheriffs, the two under-sheriffs, and a couple of aldermen arrived at the gaol. They were immediately ushered into the governor's drawing-room; and the sealed packet from the Home Office was delivered to the sheriff. He at once retired into a private room to open it: and having perused the contents, which were laconic enough, he carefully

consigned the despatch to his pocket. On returning to the drawing-room, his countenance remaining as composed as before, afforded not the least indication of the nature of the official document which he had received—while etiquette forbade even the under-sheriffs to venture an inquiry upon the point.

"I understood you on Saturday," said the sheriff, addressing himself to the governor, "that there was no person then engaged to officiate as the functionary of the law."

"And such is still the case, sir," replied the governor. "I believed that some criminal within the walls would have accepted the post of Public Executioner: but only a few minutes before your arrival the turnkeys assured me that not a single soul would undertake the office."

"Then a proclamation must be made to the multitude outside the prison," said the sheriff. "I will proceed to fulfil that duty at once."

Accordingly, followed by the under-sheriffs and the governor, the high civic functionary repaired to the debtor's door; and ascending the steps of the gallows, he mounted the platform. A dead silence fell upon the congregated mass of people, the murmuring of their myriad voices suddenly ceasing, and the oscillation of the living waves subsiding into a calm. Every eye was fixed with an expression of curiosity and suspense upon the sheriff, as he proceeded to make the proclamation, which was to the effect that an individual was required to undertake the office of Public Executioner, and that should such volunteering individual have in any way rendered himself amenable or obnoxious to the law, he (the sheriff) was empowered to offer him a free pardon for his offences.

Scarcely were the words spoken, when a loud voice exclaimed, "I accept the proposition!"—and the savage-looking black fellow already mentioned, jumped upon the barrier and scrambled up to the platform of the gallows.

"Hooray!" shouted the multitudes, which for a moment had feared that they were to be baulked of the spectacle they had crowded thither to behold.

Nor less were the aristocratic exquisites at the two windows opposite, rejoiced to find that the drama would proceed without the interruption that had for an instant appeared to threaten its tragic development.

The sheriff descended from the scaffold and reentered the prison, followed by the under-sheriffs, the governor, and the volunteer hangman: and, the clock having now struck eight, they all proceeded to the condemned cell, where Dysart and the chaplain were together.

The criminal, fully satisfied that his reprieve was in the sheriff's pocket, presented an aspect of firmness and bowed courteously to the civic authorities. These functionaries remained in the passage outside the door of the cell which was now left open; and the sheriff, addressing himself to the chaplain, said, "I wish to speak to you a moment."

The Ordinary hastened out of the cell; and as the sheriff drew him aside a little way down the corridor, Dysart perceived that he drew forth from his pocket a despatch of the invariable official shape and bearing a large seal.

"That is my reprieve!" thought Dysart: and the flood of life circulated with a more rapid flow in his veins.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the volunteer hangman, producing his whipcord to pinion the criminal's arms: then, as he drew the criminal gently aside towards the farther extremity of the cell, he hastily whispered "You've nothing to fear, Mr. Dysart. The sheriff has got your reprieve—*and I have seen it!*"

The criminal had recoiled loathingly from the first touch of the hangman—and the more so on account of his repulsive look, for the fellow's face was black as that of a negro: but the voice instantaneously sounded familiar to Dysart's ear—and surveying the wretch's countenance attentively, he recognised through the soot and grime that covered it, the features of Daniel Coffin!

Glancing towards the door, and observing that no one was noticing him particularly at the instant, Dysart gave the Hangman a nod of recognition: then, in a scarcely audible tone, he said, "You have positively seen the reprieve?"

"I saw the sheriff show it to the under-sheriffs, and even heard him read the private instructions on the margin," returned Coffin, in an equally low voice, as he pinioned the arms of the criminal.

"And those instructions—what are they?" demanded Dysart, with nervous impatience.

"That the reprieve is not to be produced till the moment the drop is ready to fall," responded the Hangman. "So you needn't be alarmed, sir: and in a quarter of an hour you will find yourself safe and sound back in this cell again."

"You are a good fellow, Coffin, for being anxious thus to reassure me," said Dysart, trembling somewhat with excitement, but not from actual fear.

"You've always behaved like a gentleman to me, sir," replied the Hangman: "and I should have been sorry indeed to tuck you up. But now's the time to move for'ard."

Having thus spoken in a hurried whisper, the Hangman signified aloud to the governor that everything was ready: and the procession was formed. The chaplain and sheriff, who had remained outside together conversing in the passage, went first. Then came Dysart, with his arms pinioned, and closely followed by the Hangman,—the governor, under-sheriffs, aldermen, and a few of the gaol officials bringing up the rear.

Along two or three stone passages did the mournful procession advance: and now the tolling of St. Sepulchre's bell became more and more plainly audible to the ear. Again did a sudden terror strike to the very heart's core of the criminal. Heavens! if the reprieve—the assurances that had hitherto sustained him—the promise of life, pardon, and liberty,—O God! if all these were but the delusions of his brain—the phantoms of his own imagination! That knell which rang so ominously—the solemn tread of the procession through the vaulted passages—the murmuring of the multitudes without—and now the deep voice of the chaplain commencing the service for the dead,—Oh! what could all this mean?—what did it signify? Wherefore this tremendous parade—this pomp and display of death itself—if all were to end in a continuance of life? And that chaplain's voice—did it breathe an accent of hope? Oh! no—no: it was profound—solemn—even sepulchral, as if warning him in unmistakable tones that this was indeed

no mockery, but an awful, appalling, stupendous reality! Yes—there was death in all this—death—death!—and the hideous conviction struck to the soul of Dysart that he was duped—deluded—deceived,—aye, unto the very verge of that grave which was already yawning at his feet!

Such were the thoughts that swept, ghastly as a train of spectres and swift as a flight of birds, through the imagination of Dysart. But the next instant his presence of mind returned: and all in a moment did he marshal and review in his fancy the circumstances that were favourable to him. The governor had solemnly affirmed that a despatch had arrived from the Home Office: he himself had seen the sheriff produce this despatch in order to display it to the chaplain;—and Daniel Coffin had given him assurances relative to the nature of its contents. It must be, then, a reprieve—it could be nothing else: oh! no—it could be nothing else!

But this hideous uncertainty!—the agonies, the tortures, the excruciations of a thousand racks were comprised therein! Oh! if he had not been so rash—so precipitate in trusting to others—if he had accepted the alternative of the three years' imprisonment—he would at least have been spared these immitigable horrors—these rending agonies! But was it too late? No: he would tell the sheriff and the governor everything—how his wife held the solemnly recorded pledge of the Prince Regent—how the compromise of three years' imprisonment had been offered him—and how he would now rather accept this proposal than proceed any farther in the pathway which terminated at the scaffold!

But, oh! miserable wretch that he was—his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth—he could not speak—he felt as if burning ashes were in his throat! Horror of horrors! what was he to do? Fleet and fast did his thoughts thus travel through his brain. *Travel!* they swept along quicker than the lightning! A whole volume would not contain the reflections which he thus made in the time that his feet were only taking a dozen steps! The page which now affords a succinct outline of those thoughts, sinks into utter insignificance when compared with the vast folios and bulky tomes that these ideas, if chronicled at length, would fill! His brain was on fire: it whirled—whirled—and yet he could not give utterance to a single one of those myriad million thoughts that were thus sweeping—dashing—flying—gushing—tearing through that maddening brain!

And now the breeze suddenly blows more freshly upon his countenance—and at the same instant his eyes, plunging through the opening of a low narrow doorway, recoil as it were from the sinister object which bursts upon them. For he is now traversing the little kitchen which is just inside that ominous-looking door whereon no eye ever fails to linger a moment when passing along the front of Newgate!

"Courage!" whispers a voice in Dysart's ear: he looks aside for an instant—and beholds the blackened countenance of the Hangman.

Recalled to himself, as it were from a hideous dream in which he appeared to have been walking, Dysart *does* summon all his courage to his aid: and fortunately for the complete gathering of his presence of mind at this supreme moment, he observes something white projecting from the sheriff's pocket. Ah! it is the reprieve—the reprieve which he has placed thus handy, so that it may be drawn forth in a moment. After all, Dysart feels that he is safe: and he ascends the steps of the scaffold, pinioned and trussed for death, with the conviction that he shall speedily descend those steps again to enter upon a new lease of life!

A solemn stillness once more falls upon the crowd—and not a murmur is heard. His is not a crime which calls for the expression of public opinion in yells and execrations: and therefore not a reproachful voice is heard—not an abusive syllable is uttered!

A dimness comes upon Dysart's eyes: he closes them hard—then opens them promptly again—and his sight has now a horrible clearness. The rapid glance which he flings right and left, shows him the countless myriads of human faces all turned towards that black funereal eminence on which he stands. The knell of St. Sepulchre's church falls like a sledge-hammer upon his brain. The eyes of the multitudes seem to pierce him through and through. And these are his sensations during the first quarter of a minute that he stands upon the scaffold: but then in that quarter of a minute are concentrated whole ages and ages of sense, feeling, faculty, and circumstance!

He is now recalled to a livelier and keener appreciation of his position by the touch of the Hangman, who nevertheless again breathes the word "Courage" in his ear. He strives to speak: but at the instant his lips are wavering, the halter circles his neck: a shriek rises to the very tip of his tongue—but it is stifled by the sudden drawing down of the night-cap over his face. Then the fingers of the Hangman are lifted from him—and he hears the wretch hasten away, his heavy feet stamping upon the hollow platform and then rushing down the ladder.

For never, never were all Dysart's faculties and organs of sense so acute as upon the present occasion: his very looks can penetrate dimly through the cotton night-cap drawn over his face!

But ah! the sudden sound as of a bolt touched beneath his feet, came thrilling up to his ear: and now again—but oh! with what an overwhelming force—struck upon his soul the conviction that he was betrayed! Yes—now 'twas sure—certain—beyond all doubt: O horror, horror—horror of horrors! he was there on the drop—'twas giving way beneath his feet——

It fell!—the blood gushed upward like lightning into his brain—strong spasms convulsed him—and in a few moments he hung a lifeless corpse!

The aristocratic party at the windows opposite remained until nine o'clock, when the body was cut down. They then returned to the *Saracen's Head*, paid the bill liberally, and took their departure in the Earl of Curzon's carriage towards the West End.

But in the meantime the Governor of Newgate was entertaining the sheriff, the under sheriffs, and the chaplain at breakfast, according to the custom which prevailed in those times relative to the mornings of public execution.

"Poor Lady Ernestina!" said the governor, "she will be dreadfully cut up. She all along made sure of her husband being reprieved: and when she left him last evening she expressed her conviction that she should meet him again to-day. From what she con-

descended to tell me, I also made certain that the extreme sentence would never be carried out."

"Such also was my opinion," observed the chaplain. "In fact, when you, sir,"—addressing himself to the sheriff,—"called me out of the prisoner's cell and produced that paper from your pocket, I made sure that it was the reprieve. You might have observed how startled I was when I looked over its contents."

"I did not pay particular notice," said the sheriff, with an air of indifference as he ate his muffin. "But, by the bye, you did not see it," he observed, turning towards the governor and the under-sheriffs.

Thus speaking, he tossed the paper across the table; and the individuals to whom he had last addressed himself, hastened to make themselves acquainted with its contents.

It ran as follows:—

"*Home Office, Saturday Evening, Oct. 20th.*

"SIR,

"I am desired by the Secretary of State to direct your attention to the demoralizing effect of capital criminals addressing observations from the scaffold to the assembled crowd; and it is requisite that this display, which has been much too common of late, should be prevented. I have therefore to request that henceforth the scene outside the gaol of Newgate, on the occasion of a public execution, shall be abbreviated as much as possible; and I have farther to desire that you will have the goodness to communicate this letter to the Reverend Ordinary of Newgate.

"I have the honour to remain, &c. &c.

"To the Sheriff of London."

This despatch was duly signed by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department. The governor, on reading it, exchanged significant glances with the chaplain, as much as to imply their regret at having been led by circumstances to buoy up Dysart with the hope of a reprieve until nearly the last minute: but they nevertheless kept the matter scrupulously secret in their own breasts. Nor did the governor entertain the slightest suspicion that he had all along been made a tool in the hands of Lady Ernestina Dysart, in thus lulling her husband into a false security.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE PREFECTURE OF POLICE.

A MONTH had now elapsed since Jocelyn Loftus was so suddenly consigned to a mysterious imprisonment in Paris, on the ground of some defect or error of nomenclature in his passport; and it will be remembered that he was thus held captive, by order of the Prefect of Police, at the Mansion of the Prefecture itself.

The room to which he was conducted has already been described as small and indifferently appointed. A tent-bedstead in an alcove, or recess,—a table—a couple of chairs—a washing-stand—and two or three other necessaries, constituted the furniture. There were two windows, each well protected with iron bars, and looking down into a gloomy court-yard surrounded with the high walls belonging to other portions of the same building—so that escape in that quarter appeared to be impossible. The door was massive and studded with large iron nails: bolts had creaked and chains had rattled outside when it was closed upon the prisoner;—and indeed every circumstance but too plainly indicated that this was in all respects a prison-chamber. Let us add that it was on the first storey and was approached by a long dark corridor, in which Jocelyn was occasionally allowed to walk—and our description is as complete as the purposes of the narrative require.

We stated that while Jocelyn was being conveyed in the hackney-coach to the Prefecture of Police, his own conjectures furnished him with some faint glimmering of the real truth as to the cause of his arrest. The brief examination he had undergone before the Prefect himself, confirmed those suspicions which he had already entertained: nor had he much difficulty in divining who was the real author of his present imprisonment. He therefore now blamed himself bitterly for having rushed so precipitately on the enterprise with the name of *Jocelyn Loftus!*

But let us now specially note the incidents of his first day's incarceration. At about one o'clock a domestic in the Prefect's livery brought in a tray furnished with copious materials for a succulent repast: but it may be well understood that Jocelyn was in no particular humour to partake of it. The man, without being precisely stern-looking, was evidently of a cold and reserved disposition—a character well suited for such a place as the Prefecture and such functions as those which he had to fulfil. Jocelyn did not question him: for, in the first place, he was tolerably well convinced that this menial could know nothing of the secrets regarding his captivity—and secondly, even if he did, he was still more certain not to betray them.

Before quitting the room, the domestic said in a tone that was coldly polite, "I am commanded, sir, to wait upon you with your meals three times a day; and on each occasion whatever orders you may wish to give, shall be obeyed—consistently with the regulations of the place. Books and writing materials you can have——"

"Yes—bring me books and writing materials," exclaimed Jocelyn, to whom it was at least some consolation to perceive that he was not to be treated with any extraordinary degree of severity.

The domestic retired—and shortly afterwards reappeared, bringing with him a large parcel of books and an ample supply of writing materials: but as he deposited them in the recess of one of the deep-set windows, he remarked, "You are at liberty, sir, to write as much as you choose *within* these walls: but I must beg you to understand that not a scrap of paper can pass hence without being previously examined by his Excellency the Prefect."

Having thus spoken, the man again departed, carefully locking and bolting the door behind him: and when once more alone, Loftus began to examine the books which had been brought him. They belonged to almost every branch of literature—novels, poetry, travels, voyages, history, politics, science, and art: but he started back in sudden dismay from this perfect cyclopædia of amusement and instruction—for the thought flashed to his mind that *here* was indeed enough reading to while away the time of a twelvemonth's imprisonment! The next moment, however, he felt angry with

himself for having allowed the incident to operate as an omen or a presage: and he murmured half aloud, "The domestic who brought those books, could not possibly be aware whether my captivity is destined to last days or years!"

Then, with characteristic courage, Loftus conjured up every possible reflection of a soothing, hopeful, or consolatory nature.

In the evening the domestic reappeared, with the prisoner's supper, which also consisted of several dishes and a liberal supply of wine. Candles were furnished without restriction as to the period of their use—so that Loftus could burn them throughout the night if he felt disposed. In the morning the breakfast that was served up to him was as copious as the other meals: and when he had partaken of the repast, an old woman was introduced by the domestic to make the bed and sweep out the room—during which process, Jocelyn was permitted to walk up and down the long dark passage outside.

We have now afforded an idea of the routine of Jocelyn's first day at the Prefecture—and thence an estimate may be drawn of the monotonous nature of his imprisonment during the month which we must suppose to have elapsed since the date of his arrest. It will however be seen that he was treated at the Prefecture of Police with as much consideration as was compatible with the circumstances of personal restraint. But was he happy? Far—very far from that! His natural courage, noble fortitude, and elevated spirit enabled him to bear up as well as the most heroic of men could do, against the misfortune which had overtaken him: but still there were moments when he could scarcely restrain an outburst of bitter anguish, as he thought of his much-loved and far-off Louisa! What could she think of a silence so unaccountable and an absence so prolonged?—must she not either believe him false, or else that some terrible calamity had befallen him? In either case, he pictured to himself all the anguish which that charming creature was thus doomed to endure: and it went to his soul to reflect that so young, so lovely, and so affectionate a being should be plunged into such deep distress.

On several occasions he had written a letter to the Prefect, beseeching that any correspondence which should have arrived for him at Meurice's Hotel or at the General Post Office of Paris, might be given up to him: but the verbal answer which the reserved domestic invariably brought back, was to the effect, "that no communications had been received at all, at either place, addressed to Mr. Jocelyn Loftus." These announcements the young gentleman knew full well to be false: for he was convinced that Louisa would have unwearedly and incessantly written letter after letter, craving, imploring, and beseeching a response;—and it was therefore with as much bitterness of spirit as indignation of feeling, that Loftus came to the conclusion that the same arbitrary police power which had violated the sanctity of his private papers on the day of his arrest, had likewise taken possession of all correspondence that had subsequently arrived for him from England.

Our young hero's state of mind was not therefore very felicitous: and a month had thus passed in deep uncertainties, varying excitements, and perplexing anxieties.

One night Jocelyn had retired to rest earlier than usual: for his health had begun to fail him in the close captivity of that chamber—and moreover he had been giving way with a very painful intensity to the poignancy of his thoughts during the evening. The clocks in the thousand towers of the sovereign city of France were proclaiming the hour of nine, when having extinguished the light, Jocelyn thus sought his couch, exhausted alike in mind and body. A deep slumber fell upon him: and he was gradually borne into the elysian mazes of a delicious dream.

He fancied that he was sleeping on a splendid sofa in a magnificently-furnished apartment:—he thought he saw himself thus reclining full dressed, as if it were in the day-time that he had lain down in this manner to rest for a short while. The saloon to which imagination had thus wafted him, was flooded with a golden light—a more than earthly radiance that penetrated throughout—a celestial lustre that rendered each nook and corner as clear and shadowless as the centre of the room itself. And now, in the midst of that transcendent glow, it appeared to Jocelyn as if angels were passing through the ambrosial air—beauteous forms displaying a lithe and slender symmetry in the scant azure drapery that floated with the grace which no sculptural skill could ever illustrate in the massive marble! Some of these empyrean beings were crowned with stars: others bore lutes which seemed to send forth a delicious music, realizing the sweet superstition of the harmony of the spheres;—while others, again, carried garlands of flowers in their hands, or scattered wreaths and posies through the translucent atmosphere. But as the celestial train swept past, every angelic countenance was bent with an expression of sweet encouragement and smiling hopefulness upon the sleeping form of Jocelyn; and as he slowly awoke from this delicious dream, while the glory of the vision itself faded slowly and gradually away from his mental perception, he could not help thinking that it was an intimation sent from heaven to cheer his soul.

While in the fervour of his grateful piety he was silently breathing a prayer to his Maker, he was suddenly startled by a singular noise which seemed to come from within the wainscotting of the alcove or recess that contained the couch whereon he lay. He listened: the noise ceased—he concluded that he had been mistaken—and he endeavoured to compose himself to slumber again. But just as his eyelids were closing beneath the bat-like wing of drowsiness, that strange sound was repeated.

He started up—held his breath—and listened more attentively than at first. The noise was like that of some one endeavouring to pierce through the masonry by means of an instrument that worked tediously in a stealthy, scraping manner, rather than with a boldness which cared not for discovery. The thought instantly struck Jocelyn that some prisoner in the next apartment was endeavouring to escape: and this idea thrilled with a sensation of joy to his heart,—for the same means which could afford the hope of flight to a fellow-captive, would avail also for himself.

The noise continued—and Jocelyn was on the point of knocking gently in order to lead the individual, whoever it might be, into conversation—supposing that a sufficient depth of excavation

in the wall had been made to render their voices audible to each other:—but the young gentleman checked himself and paused to reflect ere he took any step whatsoever in the matter. Once more reposing his head upon his pillow, but still listening attentively, he reasoned in the following strain:—

"If this be some fellow-captive who is endeavouring to make his escape, he may perchance have been led to believe that the wall through which he is boring, opens either into an empty room or an unfrequented passage—or even perhaps into some court-yard or actual outlet. Such may be his impression: and therefore if I disturb him in the midst of his labours, he may become alarmed and desist. It will be better for me to allow him to proceed so far with his work that he will ascertain for himself into what place he is penetrating: and then it will be time enough to make known to him the presence of a fellow-prisoner in *this* room, supposing that he is now unaware of its being tenanted."

Having come to this conclusion, Jocelyn Loftus did not attempt to make himself heard by his neighbour: but he nevertheless continued an attentive listener to the work that was going on. The longer he thus listened the more convinced he became that his first conjecture was well founded, and that it was indeed some fellow-prisoner stealthily pursuing the means which he hoped would lead to escape. For two hours did the work thus continue; and by following it minutely with his ears, the young gentleman was enabled to comprehend its details. Thus was it that he could distinguish when pieces of mortar were removed or portions of masonry detached and taken out of the excavation; and at the expiration of those two hours, he heard his neighbour replacing all the mortar, stones, and bricks in the hollow thus made between the wainscot—doubtless to conceal the night's work from the eyes of the morning's visitors.

All was now still: but Jocelyn could not again very speedily settle himself to slumber—for an incident had thus arisen not only to break the hitherto monotonous routine of his imprisonment, but also to excite sudden and fervid hopes of escape.

Nevertheless, after a while sleep once more revisited his eyes; and when he awoke in the morning it was some time before he could persuade himself that the occurrence of the past night was not part and parcel—although perhaps another phase—of that dream which had visited him soon after he had retired to rest.

Having risen from his couch and dressed himself, Jocelyn awaited the arrival of the serious-looking domestic: and when that individual made his appearance at nine o'clock with the breakfast-tray, the young gentleman inquired, with an apparent air of indifference, whether there were many other prisoners in the Prefecture.

"I do not know, sir," was the laconic answer: and Jocelyn felt annoyed within himself for having condescended to even so slight an attempt to gratify his curiosity through the medium of his reserved and flinty-hearted jailor.

After breakfast, the livery-servant returned—accompanied, as usual at this hour, by the old charwoman; and while she was occupied in putting the room to rights, Loftus walked, as was his wont, in the adjacent corridor. This passage has already been described as long, dark, and gloomy: it had a door at the end communicating with the staircase—and from the side opened at least a dozen doors into no doubt as many prison-chambers. While walking in this passage on the present occasion, Loftus paused at the door of the room next to his own, and listened to hear if he could catch any sound: but all was still.

In a few minutes the old woman appeared upon the threshold of his apartment, with the intimation that she had finished her avocations therein. This was a signal for him to return to its solitude: and as he did so, the old crone hastily and furtively slipped a note into his hand. He clutched it tight—Oh! as tightly as the rope is clutched that is thrown out to the shipwrecked mariner struggling in the waves amidst the boiling surges of an infuriate ocean. The old woman hurried onward—and the serious-looking domestic, who had been lounging at the end of the dark passage, now came to close the door upon our hero once more.

The instant that Jocelyn was again alone, he hastened to examine the note that had so strangely been given to him. It was not addressed to any one: it was not sealed—but merely folded up into a small compass;—and its contents, which were written in a beautiful female hand, and in the English language, were as follow:—

"FELLOW-PRISONER,—If you value your liberty and are desirous to escape from this dreadful place, lend your assistance to one who is already working to the same end. Be not alarmed, therefore, at any unusual noise which you may hear, or at any strange occurrence that may take place, during the coming night: but be in readiness to fulfil any instructions that you may receive. I am told that you are an Englishman: and you will see by this that it is a fellow-countrywoman who thus addresses you."

The astonishment of Loftus at thus discovering that his bold and venturous neighbour was a female, may be more readily conceived than described. Yes—and by her writing she was evidently a lady of good education. That the old charwoman was an accomplice in her project of escape, was evident enough: but how this lady could hope to effect this escape by simply passing from one room into another, Jocelyn was at a loss to imagine. However, that some explanation would take place during the next night appeared tolerably evident—the lady having no doubt been enabled to calculate that it only required a little more labour to pierce entirely through the massive partition-wall.

Slow and tardy as the time ever passes to persons in captivity, yet this was the slowest and most tardily lingering day that Jocelyn had yet known in the Prefecture of Police. He thought the evening would never come: but when at last the sombre shades of twilight obscured his chamber, he even then calculated with considerable impatience that it yet wanted several hours of midnight. However, as nearly everything must have an end sooner or later, so did this wearisome day terminate at last: nine o'clock struck—the serious-looking domestic having brought in the supper-tray, retired with his wonted coldly courteous "Good night"—and now Loftus felt that he was free from any further interruption on the part of his crabbed janitor.

Candles had been lighted some time: he endea-

voured to read, but could not settle his mind to any one subject of all the departments of literature contained in the books at his disposal. He therefore rose from his chair and paced the room in an agitated manner; then he sat down again and perused for the hundredth time that day the mysterious note which he had received in the morning.

Yes—it was indeed a beautiful hand-writing—fluent, clear, and delicate as that of an educated Englishwoman. But, ah! if it had only been the writing of his Louisa, what transports of happiness would he now have enjoyed! However, if the present adventure upon which his neighbour had embarked, and in which he himself was about to participate,—if this adventure, we say, should end in the accomplishment of an escape,—then, within a very few days might he fold in his arms that beloved Louisa whose image was ever uppermost in his mind, and on whose behalf he experienced so much anxiety.

The clocks had struck eleven some time, when Jocelyn suddenly became aware that the sounds of the previous night were recommencing in the wall of the alcove. He threw himself upon the bed—applied his ear to the wainscot—and listened attentively. Yes—his adventurous neighbour was evidently taking out all the loosened mortar and masonry from the aperture: and in a few minutes he was satisfied that she was continuing the process of perforation by whatsoever instrument it was that she used. Jocelyn continued to listen with breathless attention, until presently he heard the instrument itself come in contact with the wainscot to which his ear was applied. Then suddenly all was still.

"Is that wood-work?" suddenly inquired a soft female voice from the other side.

Jocelyn answered in the affirmative.

"Then if you are indeed anxious to escape," resumed that same musical voice, "or if you will

at all events assist me to escape, you must contrive to remove a portion of the wainscot."

Jocelyn at once gave the lady such assurances that must have satisfied her both as to his own desire for self emancipation and his readiness to succour all her heroic attempts. He then drew forth the bedstead from the alcove; and by means of the knife which had been left with his supper-tray, he speedily loosened a panel of the wood-work and lifted it from its setting. He now perceived that an excavation had been made of nearly two feet square through a wall upwards of a foot thick.

"Take all these implements—haste!—quick!" said the lady in the adjoining room: and as she thus spoke impatiently, but with the rich melody of youthfulness in her voice, she thrust several articles through the opening.

These consisted of a ladder made of twisted silk and pieces of fire-wood—two or three files—a bottle containing a yellow fluid—three or four skeleton keys—and a very diminutive crowbar, the whitened end of which showed that it had been the instrument principally used for making the opening in the wall. The articles were speedily taken charge of by Jocelyn; and the appearance thereof instantaneously confirmed his former suspicion that an escape was to be attempted that night. But he had little leisure for reflection, inasmuch as everything was now haste, bustle, and impatience with the heroic lady. Indeed, no sooner had he removed the above-mentioned articles from the opening through which she had thrust them, than in the hurried but harmonious accents of her voice, she said, "Now help me to pass into your chamber."

At the same time a pair of well-rounded, plump, and snow-white arms were thrust through the aperture: immediately afterwards came a head covered with a thick black veil—followed by a bust whose proportions were fraught with all the first freshness of youth. In fine, our hero taking hold of the lady's arms, assisted her as well and as delicately as he was able to pass her entire form through the opening.

When this was done and the heroine of the adventure, being raised upon her feet, stood before Jocelyn, the rapid glance which he threw upon her naturally expressed a certain amount of curiosity. He observed that she was of the middle height—with a form of youthful appearance, perfectly symmetrical in shape and characterized by much lady-like elegance. But her head, as already stated, was closely enveloped in a thick black veil; and although she could no doubt see perfectly well from behind the invidious screen, yet it was not equally easy for the eyes of an observer to penetrate through to her own countenance. That she studied Jocelyn earnestly and attentively for several moments, he could judge from the steadiness with which her veiled countenance was fixed towards him: but on *his* side he could positively distinguish neither trait nor lineament of her countenance at all. We should add that the dark veil, two or three times folded, was not merely thrown loosely over her head, but was tied in such a way round her neck that it served as a perfect mask and was not liable to be displaced by any motion or gesture on her part.

"You are doubtless astonished to see my countenance thus veiled?" said the lady, in the softest and most melting tones of her musical voice: "but it is in consequence of a solemn vow which I have made."

"A vow!" exclaimed Loftus, in astonishment, and almost with an accent of incredulity and suspicion.

"Yes—it is a vow," answered the lady, with a certain dignity in her tone and a drawing up of her form as if she resented the incredulous manner of our hero:—"a vow rashly and precipitately made, it is true—a vow pledged in the moment of despair—but to which I am not the less bound to pay implicit devotion."

"But wherefore so singular a vow?" inquired Jocelyn, now fancying that if the lady were not some adventuress, she was probably of unsettled intellects.

"You think that I am mad?" she said, thus evidently penetrating his thoughts once more, but now speaking in a milder and mournfuller tone: "it would be perhaps a blessing for one so profoundly acquainted with sorrow as I am, to sink into the oblivion of a benighted intellect, or become a prey to the fanciful vagaries of dreams! But, alas! alas! life has already been and still is too stern a reality for me. Under such circumstances, and considering the absolute necessity which exists for me to give you some explanation,—so as to convince you that you are not embarking in this night's enterprise with either an adventuress imprisoned for wrong-doing, or a mad woman confined on account of her malady,—for these reasons, I say, you will not deem me vain or frivolous in declaring that it is the beauty of this now veiled countenance which has been the cause of all my misfortunes! Yes—that beauty which, I solemly declare, I myself value not, has rendered me the object of persecution and even of vengeance on the part of a host of great, noble, and powerful admirers to whose honied words I would not listen. Being my own mistress—or I should rather say, being a friendless Englishwoman, thus tormented by a hornet's nest of French princes, dukes, marquises, counts, viscounts, and barons—aye, and by even the very Prefect himself," she added with a bitter significancy of tone and with a gesture of deep meaning,—"I have passed through an ordeal——"

"Ah! then it is because you would not listen to the overtures of all those great personages—but the Prefect especially," exclaimed Loftus, now believing the tale and becoming indignant at the outrage thus offered to a lady and a countrywoman,—"it is for all this, I presume, that you have been imprisoned here?"

"Such is indeed the truth," answered the lady. "And now can you wonder if, when snatched from my home, and brought a prisoner hither three weeks ago, I should in my rage, my fury, and my despair, have made a vow to the effect that never, never again will I reveal my countenance to a being in the form of *man!* No—never, never," she exclaimed, with a sort of frenzied petulance, "until I encounter some one who shall have learnt to love me, *not* for the beauty of my countenance, or the magnitude of my fortune, but for those gentle, endearing, and more sterling qualities which as a woman I possess. Now therefore," she added with the hurried tone of one who was well pleased at having finished a most painful explanation, "now, therefore, let us to work—and endeavour to insure our escape!"

"That is, after all, the essential point," said Jocelyn, not thinking it worth while to trouble himself

farther concerning the eccentric lady's history, as every instant that was lost in the gratification of mere curiosity could only tend to diminish the eventual chances of success. "But tell me——"

"One word!" she interrupted, with a sort of petulant impatience that appeared to be characteristic of her: "we must at all events know how to address each other during the short time we remain together. What is your name?"

"Jocelyn Loftus," was the answer.

"And mine is Laura Linden," she immediately rejoined, in a tone so full of ingenuousness and unaffected simplicity that our young hero was angry with himself for having in any way suspected her even for a moment. "Perhaps you have heard of me before?"

"No—never," answered Jocelyn. "But permit me to observe that since your enemies appear to be so very rancorous, and for such unworthy or rather scandalous causes, it will become my duty to propose to you, on our escape hence, such escort and protection as I may be enabled to afford."

"Which I shall accept cheerfully and thankfully back to England," replied Laura. "And now let us apply ourselves earnestly and vigorously to work."

"But have you already any settled plan which you are pursuing, Miss Linden?" inquired Loftus.

"I have ascertained the whole geography of the immense range of buildings which constitute the Prefecture," replied the lady. "The old charwoman, yielding to heavy bribes and to the still more munificent promises which I made her, has been won over to my interests. It was she who supplied me with such implements as I required: and she also described to me the situation of every part of the entire structure. There is not a room, nor a corridor, nor a courtyard, the topography of which remains unknown to me. This knowledge made me aware that if I succeeded in escaping from the windows of my own room, I should have to descend into a courtyard where detection and arrest would be inevitable. I therefore resolved—on learning that my neighbour (I mean yourself) was an Englishman—to penetrate into this room and achieve my flight by means of one of those casements. There is no sentinel in the court below: I know all its outlets—and with a courageous spirit to succour us, we may be free long ere the first ray of dawn shall glimmer in the eastern horizon."

"I presume," said Loftus, glancing upon the various articles laid upon the table, "that we are to file away the bars of the window—descend by the silken ladder into the courtyard—and make use of those skeleton-keys for any door that may bar our progress?"

"Such is the course which I propose," answered Laura.

"But this bottle of yellow fluid?" said Jocelyn, inquiringly.

"It is nitric acid to moisten the iron bars, and render the filing of them more easy. But quick! quick!" she again cried with petulant impatience: "let us to work!"

"It is now half-an-hour past midnight," observed Loftus, consulting his watch: "let us see if we have sufficient time before us to execute all that is to be done."

Thus speaking, he gently and noiselessly opened one of the casements: and holding a candle close to the bars, he examined them attentively.

"Yes, Miss Linden," he observed, "I will undertake to remove a couple of those bars in two hours—an hour for each. Then judging from your ideas of the topography of the place, shall we have sufficient time to accomplish all that may afterwards remain to be done ere daylight?"

"Yes—undoubtedly," answered Laura, with all the nervous trepidation of a captive impatient to be free.

But scarcely was this rapid colloquy interchanged, when a gruff voice, coming from the courtyard below, exclaimed in French, "Shut that window up there, and put out the lights directly!"—and at the same time the rattling of a bunch of keys was heard.

"Good heavens!" murmured the lady, clasping her hands as if in despair: "it is the watchman going his rounds, who has thus observed us!"

"And now," said Loftus, in a tone of bitter disappointment, "we must look upon all our hopes as annihilated!"

"Not so—not so," ejaculated Laura, as if suddenly inspired with new courage: "but we must assuredly abandon our project for this night—and in the morning I will ascertain from the old charwoman the precise hours at which that watchman goes his rounds. We can then conduct our operations accordingly to-morrow night."

"Be it so," said Loftus, well pleased to observe that Miss Linden, who evidently knew far more concerning the arrangements of the Prefecture than he did, was not disposed to resign herself to despair.

"Now then, Number 15 there! are you going to put out those lights?" exclaimed the gruff voice of the watchman from the courtyard below: and again did he clank his keys, as if backing his words by the sounds of the emblems of authority.

"My good friend," said Jocelyn, approaching the casement, which still remained open, "this is the first time that ever I have been ordered to extinguish my candles——"

"But if you have been allowed to keep them burning, it was only through an indulgence, and not as a right," interrupted the watchman, doggedly.

"Is it because you observed the window open, that you now seek to curtail that indulgence?" asked Loftus, in as mild and as conciliatory a tone as he could possibly adopt.

"Well, I must say that it does look rather suspicious," returned the watchman, curtly: "and therefore, if you want to avoid being reported to the Prefect in the morning, you will at once do as I bid you, by shutting that window and putting out those lights."

"For heaven's sake, keep not the man in parley, Mr. Loftus!" murmured Miss Linden, from the corner of the room into which she had shrunk: "he will suspect something—and all our hopes will be ruined!"

"Good night, my friend," said Loftus, speaking from the casement to the watchman below. "Your wishes shall immediately be complied with:"—and having closed the window, he blew out the candles.

The room was now suddenly plunged into total darkness: and the reader will not require to be informed that Jocelyn was placed in a very singular and awkward predicament. There he was, alone—in

the utter obscurity and in the depth of the night—in a bed-chamber, with a young and no doubt beautiful woman—a situation in which most men would have envied him. But his own high principles of honour and integrity—his fidelity towards Louisa Stanley, amounting positively to a devotion and a worship — and likewise the generous and manly considerations which he experienced on behalf of a young, eccentric, but heroic being whom circumstances had thus so suddenly thrown in his way—all these combined at once to raise him as it were above the embarrassment of his position and render him superior to its awkwardness, perplexity, and bewilderment.

"Miss Linden," he said almost immediately, "I am far more distressed on your account than on my own, that this enterprise should have experienced so sudden a check, after all the anxiety, toil, and fatigue which you have undergone."

"Oh! that is nothing—nothing, Mr. Loftus," she said, "provided success will smile upon the undertaking to-morrow night."

As she thus spoke our hero could judge by the sound of her voice, the slight rustling of her silk dress, and the gentle tread of her footsteps, that she was approaching towards him: and in a few moments he felt a hand laid gently upon his arm.

"You are endowed with an extraordinary courage," he observed, by way of response to her last observation.

"Yes—it is indomitable, so long as it is sustained by the excitement of the enterprise," answered Laura: "but a reaction soon comes on—and then, alas! I melt into all a woman's weakness. Guide me to a seat, Mr. Loftus: for a sudden faintness is coming over me," she murmured in a tone of tremulous entreaty: and at the same time she clung to our hero with her warm naked arms, as if to prevent herself from falling.

Jocelyn hastened to conduct her to the chair which he knew to be nearest: and she sank upon it like one overcome by physical and mental exhaustion.

"This veil suffocates me," she said, with that petulance which appeared the characteristic of her disposition: "thank Heaven, a pitchy darkness prevails at this moment—so that I can take it off and breathe fresh air!"—then by the sound which met his ears, Jocelyn knew that she was removing the veil from her head. "Now give me a glass of water, Mr. Loftus," she said, after a few moments' pause.

He felt his way to a shelf on which a decanter and glasses stood: and filling a tumbler with water, he returned to where the lady was seated.

"Place the glass to my lips," she said, in a faint and dying tone, so that Loftus became very seriously alarmed lest she should swoon outright.

He hastened to comply with her request, and by raising the tumbler to her lips, enabled her thus to imbibe the cooling beverage.

"Enough, enough," she murmured, in a voice that was now scarcely audible: and her head drooped completely against Jocelyn's breast, as he stood close by the chair in which she was seated.

"Heavens! what can I do for you, Miss Linden?" he inquired, now truly perplexed and most cruelly bewildered.

"Nothing, nothing—I shall be better presently," she said, still very faintly, but somewhat more audibly than before: "it is a passing indisposition—let me repose for a few minutes upon your couch, and then I shall be so far restored as to be enabled to creep back into my own room."

As she thus spoke, she clung to Jocelyn in such a manner that he was compelled to raise her in his arms, and sustain her — indeed, we might almost say carry her—towards the couch. But these attentions he bestowed upon her with as much tender delicacy as a brother would exhibit towards a well-beloved sister: and it might have also been with that sisterly reliance on her part which present circumstances were so well calculated to inspire,—it might have been, we say, in that same artless, ingenuous, and unsophisticated spirit, that Laura Linden herself clung so tenaciously to our hero. At all events, full certain was it that her round plump arms encircled his neck—her full and well developed bust was in the closest contact with his chest—her head lay droopingly upon his shoulder—and her whole form was yielded up, as it were, in the utter abandonment of exhaustion and faintness, as a sleeping child is borne in the arms of a father. He felt her warm cheek against his own—her fragrant breath fanning his face—her silky tresses commingling with his own hair: and as she heaved quick short gaspings, like half-suffocated sobs, the firm bosom palpitated with rapid undulations against his breast. Thus, had there been aught of grossness or impurity in his imagination, he must have yielded to such exquisite temptations: for assuredly that position was seductive enough to melt the stoicism of an anchorite or vanquish the virtue of an angel.

Gently depositing Laura Linden upon the couch, Jocelyn inwardly hoped, by everything solemn and sacred, that she would not fall off into a complete swoon, but would speedily recover. He remained standing by the couch, in that same brotherly spirit of readiness to minister any attention that might be required: nor could he very well have retreated, even had he been so disposed—for the lady, apparently with the nervous tenacity of one whose ideas are thrown into confusion, had caught hold of his hands and retained them clasped in her own.

"Do you feel better, Miss Linden?" asked Jocelyn.

"Yes—much better, I thank you," she responded, pressing his hands as if in gratitude to her bosom. "You have been kind—very kind to me," she murmured in a tremulous tone: "no brother could have been kinder or more affectionate;"—and she imprinted a kiss upon the hand which was nearest to her lips at the moment.

Jocelyn started perceptibly at what seemed to him an uncalled-for manifestation of a too tender gratitude: and the next moment Laura suddenly abandoned the hold which she had upon his hands, exclaiming, "I feel so much better now, that I will return into my own room. But you must assist me to pass through the aperture," she added with that musical vibration of tone, which showed that she was smiling at the idea.

Rising slowly from the couch and in a manner which seemed to indicate that she was still weak and feeble, Miss Linden felt her way towards the opening in the wall—Jocelyn following close behind her. After three or four vain and ineffectual en-

deavours to pass her form through the aperture, she said in a voice apparently trembling with alarm, "Good heavens! I cannot possibly accomplish my purpose! You remember that you had to drag me through into your own room—and therefore I cannot pass back into my chamber, unless similarly assisted by some one *there*. What is to be done?" she demanded impatiently.

"Compose yourself, Miss Linden—and try once more," responded Loftus. "It is absolutely necessary that you should get back without delay, to remove all traces of our proceedings: otherwise the Prefect's livery-servant, when he visits our rooms in the morning——"

"Oh! yes—the chances of detection have now become fearful!" interrupted Laura, clinging as if in despair to our young hero. "But it is no use for me to try and pass through that aperture: I can not—it hurts me—it lacerates my flesh——"

"Then what in heaven's name shall we do?" asked Jocelyn, more cruelly bewildered and perplexed than ever.

"There is no alternative, I fear," replied the lady in a tone that suddenly became solemnly serious—for the predicament in which she was placed indeed seemed but too well calculated to shock the feelings of a modest damsel:—"there is only one alternative, I say," she repeated; "and that is to await as patiently as we can until the first dawn of morning shall afford us a glimmer of light by which we may enlarge the aperture. This will not take long to do, and will still leave ample time ere the coming of our jailor, to replace all the masonry and wood-work, and thus remove every trace of our proceedings. I fear, Mr. Loftus, that there is no other alternative than the course I have pointed out."

"It indeed appears so," observed Jocelyn, in a tone which expressed all the cruel embarrassment which he so keenly felt.

Our young hero and the beauteous Laura Linden therefore found themselves doomed to remain together for several hours in the darkness of the chamber and surrounded by all the temptations of this strange predicament.

CHAPTER LXVII.

LORD AND LADY SACKVILLE.

LEAVING Jocelyn Loftus and his eccentric companion for a while in the prison-chamber at the Prefecture of Police, we must now return to the English capital.

In a magnificently furnished saloon at Carlton House, and between ten and eleven at night, Lord and Lady Sackville were seated together upon a sofa. Nothing could exceed the splendour by which they were surrounded: and if every thing that was luxurious, gorgeous, and superb, could render existence supremely blest, then must this young and handsome pair have been pre-eminently happy.

The gilded furniture—the rich draperies—the thick carpets—the ornaments of rarest porcelain—the tables covered with all those fashionable trinkets, trifles, and nick-nacks, which, though mere useless nothings, are nevertheless so pre-eminently costly,—all these features, phases, and evidences of consummate splendour and refined luxury characterised the new abode of Lord and Lady Sackville. Indeed, one of the handsomest suites of apartments in the Prince Regent's palace had thus been assigned to them: and yet, although they were the envy and admiration of the entire fashionable world, we now find them seated mournfully together in that splendid saloon!

Nevertheless, Venetia looked transcendently lovely in the gorgeous dress that she wore; and her husband, as he gazed upon her, might well have been proud of possessing such a wife. On the other hand, never had Horace himself seemed more truly handsome; and any wife might have been proud of such a husband. Besides, was not their name gilded with a title?—did not the glory of a patrician coronet encircle their brow? Had not a pension of three thousand a year been conferred upon the newly-created peer, in order, as the cant phrase goes, "that he might be enabled to support his rank:" had he not an additional income arising from the office of Lord Steward in the Regent's Household?—and did not the tables in that very saloon groan beneath the evidences of the lavish profusion with which the Prince showered down the choicest gifts upon Venetia? Wherefore, then, was this noble couple a prey to melancholy? wherefore had a cloud settled upon their countenances. Had they not all that honour, wealth, splendour, and distinction could contribute or combine to ensure their felicity?—were they not the idols of the fashionable world?—was not Horace courted, flattered, and smiled upon by the proudest Dukes and haughtiest Earls?—and did not the stateliest Duchesses and the most exclusive Countesses regard Venetia as a being second only to a Queen? In a word, was not Lady Sackville caressed and fawned upon by the whole British Aristocracy, because she was the mistress of the Prince Regent?—and was not Lord Sackville similarly courted because he was the husband of that royal harlot?

Yes—it was precisely because Venetia was thus the mistress of the Prince, and it was because her husband was the pander to her shame—for these reasons was it they were mournful now. This was almost the first time they had found themselves alone together since the whirl of pleasure, gaiety, and fashionable dissipation had commenced immediately after Venetia surrendered herself to the arms of the Prince. But on this particular occasion his Royal Highness was engaged with the Ministers; and it happened that Lord and Lady Sackville were invited to no fashionable *re-union* for the evening—nor had they company in their own apartments. The consequence was that when the royal dinner-party had broken up, Horace and Venetia found themselves thus alone—thus as it were compelled to look each other in the face despite the feelings of shame that were struggling in their hearts. For be it understood that they were not yet so inured to depravity, nor so thoroughly steeped in profligacy, as to have become altogether callous to the whispering of the soul's innermost voices and the influence of the heart's better feelings.

"Venetia, my dearest wife," said Horace, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips, "tell me—are you happy?"

"Nay—answer me the same question *first*," said Venetia, looking in his face for a moment—then colouring deeply, and casting down her beauteous eyes, as if the lids were oppressed with a weight of shame.

"Did we not agree," asked Lord Sackville, "on that memorable night—or rather morning—when you returned to Acacia Cottage from Carlton House——"

"Oh! allude not thus particularly to that night!" said Venetia, with a strong shudder which swept visibly over her entire form, as a rapid breeze appears to bear a sudden ruffle along the surface of the lake.

"Pardon me, my love, for being too explicit," exclaimed Horace, noticing that cold tremor: "but I was merely desirous of reminding you of a special occasion on which we agreed that we would make ourselves happy in spite of all circumstances."

"Yes—I remember full well," returned Venetia: "and heaven knows that I have endeavoured to make myself, and also to make *you*, as happy as possible! But——"

"But what?" ejaculated Horace, starting from the sofa, and speaking with the nervous abruptness of a man who is irresistibly impelled to court explanations which he nevertheless dreads to hear.

"Sit down, Horace—sit down," said Venetia: "and I will tell you what I mean."

But instead of resuming his place by her side on the sofa, he seated himself upon a footstool—pillowed his head upon her lap—and said, "Now speak frankly, Venetia—and tell me all that you have to impart."

"Ah! this position which you have taken—this attitude which you have assumed—here—sitting at my feet," exclaimed Venetia, powerfully moved and profoundly touched, "reminds me of the days of our honeymoon—that honeymoon which was so short—yes, short but beatific like a glimpse of Paradise! Then we were all love—all confidence—all childish playfulness: we could look each other in the face, only to smile—and not to blush! But now—now, how altered is it all—what a change has come over us! By rising to an elevation which makes us envied, flattered, fawned upon, we have been made to loath, detest, and abhor ourselves—Oh! may God grant that we shall not end by loathing, detesting, and abhorring each other!"

"Heavens, Venetia! to hear thee talk thus," exclaimed Lord Sackville, "drives me mad. Why—even within a few hours after what may be termed your *fall*—yes, even the very next morning—we could look each other in the face without blushing! But now it seems as if the pangs of remorse and the poignancy of shame have sprung into keen vitality again—as if memory, instead of being blunted with the lapse of days and weeks, is actually becoming sharpened—as if pleasure could not drown that memory in its roseate floods—as if luxury could not lull our recollections into repose—and as if honours, riches, adulation, and rank could not appease us for what we have done!"

"Oh! look up at me, Horace—look up," exclaimed Venetia, in the melting harmony of that delicious voice which penetrated like a strain of celestial music into the soul: "look up to me a moment, my beloved husband! Let us forget what we are—let us forget what has passed—let us forget also what is to come—and think only of this present moment! For we are here alone together: and Oh! let us concentrate our thoughts into a dream, if it may not be a reality of bliss!—let us indulge in an embrace as warm, as tender, and as affectionate as those in which we were wont to steep our senses ere the date of what you just now so truthfully denominated *my fall!*"

"Yes—Oh! yes—let us embrace thus," cried Horace, suddenly inspired with all the enthusiasm of adoration and devotion for his young and beauteous wife: then, as he knelt at her feet, he gazed up passionately into her glowing countenance—while she looked down with equal tenderness upon him;—and then their lips met in a kiss more delicious than any in which those lips had joined since the memorable date of Venetia's fall.

But now as Horace, resuming his place upon the footstool, gazed up at his wife—now that he surveyed her with a fondness as fervid and as impassioned as ever he was wont to display previous to that night of her degradation and her shame,—he could not help feeling rejoiced at possessing a woman of such transcending beauty, even though he was compelled to abandon her at times to the arms of another! But as his eyes slowly travelled over her entire person,—commencing with that superb auburn hair which lay upon her brow like dark gold on alabaster,—then lingering on that countenance every feature of which was so faultless in its chiselling and so classic in its style of beauty—those eyes of such tender melting blue that not even the hyacinth on India's fields could compare therewith—those lips of such delicious redness and dewy moisture, ever remaining the least thing apart so as not only to give a softly sensuous expression to the countenance, but also to afford a glimpse of teeth whiter than the pearls of the East,—then, continuing this survey, to trace the swan-like curvature of that snowy neck—the voluptuous fulness of those sloping and softly-rounded shoulders—the grandeur of that bust which swelled into a luxuriance more ample than sculptural richness ever set forth, rising like hemispheres of polished alabaster in their well-divided contours, yet with that hue of life wherein the marble can never rival the living form, and appearing to the look full of glowing ardour, warmth, and passion,—then, still proceeding with the survey, to mark the wasp-like symmetry of the waist, and the robust proportions of the naked arms, so admirably rounded, so polished, and so white,—then, with descending look, to gather from the folds of the drapery an outline or shadowing forth of the splendid symmetry of all the lower limbs, and to finish the survey with a view of the well-rounded but slender ankle, and of the long shapely foot resting on the very ottoman where he sate—Oh thus to wander over the beauties of that woman and linger on all her charms in detail from head to foot,—was it not indeed sufficient to crown the happiness of any man, to know that this transcendent being was his own?

"Now I feel happy once more—as happy as I was wont to be," said Horace, taking his wife's hands in both his own and playing with the long tapering fingers so beautifully crowned with the arching nails of pellucid rosiness. "Thou art indeed wondrously beautiful, my Venetia: and I am rejoiced that, amidst the whirl of pleasure and dissipation, we have at length found an hour's leisure to be alone with each other thus."

"Yes—I love thee, my Horace—O God! I love thee," exclaimed Venetia, suddenly throwing her arms round his neck as if with the impulse of frenzied violence: then as a strong shudder again

swept through her form, she cried, almost with accents of despair, "Ah! would to God that I never more should be clasped in any arms but thine own!"

"Now tell me what you mean, Venetia," said Horace: "come, let there be confidence between us. I see that something is dwelling in your mind—and it will ease thee to disburden thyself to the ears of thy husband."

"Listen then, my beloved Horace—and I will tell thee," said Venetia, in a low and stifling tone, as if her very thoughts were choking her ere she gave utterance to them. "But there — pillow thy head upon my bosom, with thy face downward—so that I may not meet thy looks while I proceed to unveil the secret cause that makes me shudder. It is," she continued in a low, deep, almost hollow tone, as if her voice had suddenly lost its wonted harmony—"it is that I loath, hate, and abhor that Prince to whom I have been sold—or rather to whom I have sold myself:—it is that I detest the hypocrisy which compels me to smile upon him, to appear to receive his caresses joyfully, and to be compelled to lavish upon him the tenderest caresses in return! But worse, worse than all *that*," added Venetia, bending down her head so that her lips touched her husband's ear as his own head reposed upon her bosom: then in words that seemed to hiss as if coming from the mouth of a snake, she whispered, "It is, Horace, that I would sooner submit to the hideous pawings of an imp, than to the loathsome embraces of that filthy sensualist!"

Horace started up, with a violent sob suddenly bursting from his breast: and beginning to pace the room in a manner fearfully excited, he exclaimed, "O horror! that my own wife should be doomed to make such a revelation as this to my ears!—Oh! that one whom I have loved so fondly, madly, devotedly—and whom I still love so well—should be consigned to so hellish a fate—so damnable a destiny! But it is all my fault—my fault," he repeated, striking his breast forcibly: "it is I who could have saved her while she was as yet far off from the precipice—it was I who could have rescued her at the moment she was trembling above it! But, no—base villain that I was! I suffered her to fall."

"Reproach not yourself, my dearest husband," murmured the well known voice which had now regained all its wonted sweetness and characteristic melody—and at the same instant a beauteous white hand was laid upon his shoulder. "It is not your fault! I was fore-doomed and predestined even before you and I first met! You know it—you know it, Horace," repeated Lady Sackville; "and long before you agreed to marry me you were aware how inextricably I was entangled—by what solemn vows I was engaged—by what pledges I was bound—and under what influences I was controlled! You knew that all the appearances of ease, comfort, and wealth, which surrounded me at Acacia Cottage, could have been swept away in a moment had I dared deviate from the path which had been chalked out for me to pursue: you were likewise aware that Mrs. Arbuthnot herself was a spy upon my actions, reporting every look, word, and deed of mine to the supreme authority in Stratton Street. Such was my condition before my marriage with you: and since——"

"Ah! since," ejaculated Horace, with passionate vehemence: "it is this that goads me to desperation! For when once you were my wife, I could have rescued you from those trammels which had previously enthralled you—I might have turned round upon those who had thus enmeshed you in their toils—I could have said, '*This lady is my wife, and shall not be the slave of your intrigues,*'—all this could I have done—and you would have been saved—and we might still be enabled to look each other in the face without blushing at the thought of that crowning degradation to which you, my unfortunate wife, have been doomed to submit!"

"Not so, not so, Horace," said Venetia, now evidently taking upon herself the task of consoling, reassuring, and tranquilizing her husband: "for had we dared, when our hands were joined in matrimony, to rise up boldly against the authority which I had previously sworn to obey—that very authority, too, which assented to our union only on express and positive conditions—all the *past* would have been pitilessly and remorselessly made public in order to stamp me with the reputation of an adventuress!"

"They could not have done it—they dared not!" cried Horace, stamping his foot with indignation. "There was no ground for it: you were no adventuress—if you were, 'twas by others you were made so——"

"Ah!" said Venetia, with a peculiar look, "you forget into whose hands I fell, and who first introduced me——"

"Enough, enough of all this!" ejaculated Horace, suddenly. "I see that you are right: we could not have acted otherwise than we have done! And after all," he added, abruptly, "we are fools to make ourselves miserable. I am Lord Sackville—you are Lady Sackville: I am a Peer of the Realm—you are a Peeress: we possess titles and pensions which cannot be taken away from us—our fortunes are therefore made for life; and it is now our bounden duty to endeavour to enjoy that life as well as we are able."

"Yes—we must make up our minds to adopt this course," said Venetia. "And indeed," she cried, with a sudden access of that callous, selfish, heartless feeling which makes the thorough *woman of the world*,—"we possess all the realities and substantials—the essentials and the materials—to make existence thoroughly happy. It will therefore be our own faults if we allow sentiment and feeling to interfere with that happiness."

"Yes," observed Horace, readily arming himself with the buckler of that cold selfishness which Venetia had just assumed: "it will only be a false feeling and a maudlin sentimentalism that can be allowed to interfere with the realities of our happiness. Let us then agree, solemnly agree," continued Horace, "never more to talk softness and tenderness to each other—but to look, speak, and act as the thorough man and woman of the world."

"Yes, cheerfully do I subscribe to that agreement," responded Venetia.

"Then henceforth our very love shall cease to be a sentiment," continued Horace, "and shall merely be a sensualism. We will have no jealousies—piques—vexations——"

"No boyish and girlish dalliance and romance," added Venetia;—"no poetry of the feelings——"

"Naught save passions, cravings, and impulses

that become men and women of the world," exclaimed Horace. "And now, my beautiful wife—as thou art indeed more ravishingly beautiful than ever this evening—especially with that rich glow upon thy cheeks,—let us retire to our own chamber that in each other's arms we may taste the joys of paradise."

With the wanton glow deepening upon her countenance, and with a soft and sensuous lustre stealing into her swimming eyes, Venetia was extending her hand towards her husband, when the door suddenly opened—and the Prince Regent burst somewhat unceremoniously into the room.

"My dear Horace—my dear Venetia," he said, tapping the former familiarly upon the back, but at once flinging his arm round the waist of the latter, —"I thought I should have been kept up by the Ministers till two or three o'clock this morning: fortunately, however, I have got rid of them—and now I am my own master once again."

Thus speaking, he gave a significant nod to Lord Sackville, who was compelled to obey it by at once leaving the room. But as he turned away to seek the door, the colour came and went upon his cheeks in such rapid transitions, and he bit his ashy lip so violently, that the poignancy of his emotions may be better conceived than described.

Venetia remained in the gorgeous saloon with the Prince—while her husband, not only baffled in the anticipation of enjoying the company of his own wife that night, but also compelled to sneak like a vile cur away, retired to his solitary chamber. There he was compelled to gloat upon his titles and his honours, in order to sooth the sense of shame and degradation that rankled so bitterly in his mind.

Whatever annoyance Venetia might have felt at being thus forced to yield to the whims and minister to the phantasies of his Royal Highness, she nevertheless most artfully and successfully veiled her emotions beneath a smiling aspect.

"Do you know, my angel," said the Prince, who had evidently been drinking with tolerable freedom, and whose vinous breath was most sickly and nauseating to Venetia as he bestowed hot kisses upon her countenance; "do you know," he said "that those cursed Ministers, by coming so suddenly and so unseasonably to pester me on State affairs, deprived me of a little pastime which certain young ladies had contemplated for my diversion? However, it is not yet too late," he exclaimed, starting to his feet: "and if you choose, you shall be a spectatress, though an unseen one, of the amusement."

"Of what nature is this pastime?" inquired Venetia, eagerly catching at any thing that seemed calculated to release her from the loathsome caresses which the Prince was now lavishing upon her.

"Come and see," he replied: and giving her his arm, he conducted her across the principal landing, down a long passage, into an ante-chamber, at the extremity of which was a glass-door communicating with another apartment.

"Remain here, my love," said the Prince: "but if the phantasy should seize you to come and join our sport, pray do so without ceremony."

Having thus spoken, and bestowing another parting caress upon Venetia, the Prince hastened by the glass-door into the adjoining apartment.

Lady Sackville now approached this glass-door; and peeping between the crimson blinds in such a way that she could see everything without being seen herself, she plunged her looks into the interior of the magnificent saloon which his Royal Highness had just entered. For magnificent it indeed was—furnished in the most luxurious style, and flooded with the light poured forth by numerous chandeliers and lamps. But what chiefly interested Venetia, was the circumstance that five or six young ladies, all of whom she recognized as belonging to the proudest families of the Aristocracy, had gathered round the Prince, and were assailing him with all the artillery alike of their charms and their wit. Venetia was not jealous at the position in which her royal lover was thus placed: she loathed and detested him too cordially to experience a sentiment which though in itself a noxious weed, yet can only flourish when moistened by the dews of love;—and she likewise despised and contemned him more than ever for having brought her to behold the present spectacle.

"He believes me to be utterly and thoroughly depraved," she thought within herself, "and that I take delight in all kinds of profligacy. Well, perhaps the time may come when I shall do so. At all events, henceforth I shall never hesitate to follow my own inclinations, and gratify any caprices that may take possession of me: for I perceive full well that virtue is a mockery—delicacy a laughing-stock—and propriety an imaginary thing, within the precincts of a Court!"

Venetia was thus musing to herself, when she became aware of footsteps behind her. She turned abruptly round—and beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

Now, it will be remembered that the baronet, when availing himself of his turn to prosecute the love-campaign against Venetia (then Miss Trelawney), had proposed marriage to the lady; and though she had declined the proposal with a considerable amount of raillery and smart rapartee, they had parted most excellent friends. It is true that Venetia was fully aware of Huntingdon's having employed Captain Tash to watch her movements: but as she had subsequently derived a positive and considerable advantage (in the Malpas affair) from that circumstance, she was by no means inclined to cherish it as a grudge against the baronet. Moreover she did not forget that he had been one of the first to congratulate her at St. George's Church upon her marriage. Altogether she rather liked him; for he was excessively good-tempered—and we have already said that he was of handsome though dissipated appearance: but then it was that pale and interesting aspect of dissipation which is not without its admirers amongst ladies in the fashionable walks of life.

From these observations the reader will not be surprised to learn that Venetia extended her hand in a most friendly manner and smiled very graciously, as she thus found herself face to face with the baronet.

"Ah! Lady Sackville," he exclaimed, evidently astonished to meet her in that ante-room. "It is always a pleasure to encounter you anywhere: but may I ask what on earth your ladyship is doing here?"

"The Prince—with that exquisite taste which so often characterises him," replied Venetia, an expression of peculiar contempt curling her lovely

lip,—"brought me hither to behold some drama in which he is doubtless to perform the principal part."

"It was precisely to take a share in this said drama," observed the baronet, "that the Prince invited me hither also. It is true that I am somewhat behind time: but I cannot regret a delay which has produced me the pleasure of meeting your ladyship."

"You know," said Venetia, in a tone of good-humoured raillery, "that I always take compliments for precisely what they are worth."

"If the syllables which fall from my lips were diamonds," answered Sir Douglas Huntingdon, "they would still be of infinitely too poor a value to form a sentence that should adequately proclaim your praise."

"That is assuredly the most costly flattery that has ever yet been offered up to me," observed Lady Sackville, with one of her sweetest smiles. "But are you not going to enter the room where your presence is doubless wanted?"

"I would much rather remain here, if your ladyship would permit me," replied the baronet, his looks settling upon her with an admiration which though fervid was full of respect.

"I cannot possibly refuse such agreeable companionship," answered Venetia: and suffering her eyes to linger upon him for a moment, she gave him as it were that coquettish kind of encouragement which may in reality mean nothing, but which an enthusiastic admirer is sure to interpret far otherwise.

"But will you remain here?" asked the baronet, glancing towards the door leading into the saloon.

"Most assuredly," returned Venetia. "I am anxious to behold this drama in which you were to perform a part: and there can certainly be no harm in my contemplating the scene, inasmuch as

I recognise five or six young ladies of the highest rank about to join in the diversions."

While thus speaking, Lady Sackville stooped slightly down, and peeped between the blinds. Sir Douglas Huntingdon followed her example; and their heads thus came in gentle contact. The baronet was not likely to withdraw from so pleasant a vicinage; and Lady Sackville did not. Their heads thus remained touching each other—their hair mingling; and in this position did they contemplate what was passing within the gorgeously furnished and brilliantly lighted saloon.

The young ladies of aristocratic birth were clad in the light and gauzy apparel of figurantes, with their hair tastefully arranged—so that it appeared as if their forms were arrayed and their toilet chosen with a view to produce a dramatic effect. Very beautiful indeed were these young ladies: but it was evident from their burning looks and wanton attitudes, that modesty with them was but a garment of convenience.

A strain of music stole softly through the room—issuing from a piano the position of which was unseen by Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon at the glass door: and now the aristocratic young ladies timed their graceful steps to that delicious harmony. Taking from a sideboard several garlands and wreaths of artificial flowers, they raised them with their bare arms above their heads, playing with them as it were in a manner that enabled them to show off the beauties of their forms in attitudes more classically graceful, more studiously indelicate than the most reckless ballet-dancer or figurante of the present day. Then suddenly quickening their pace, they whirled round and round the Prince—flinging the garlands and the posies at him—endeavouring to trip him up with the wreaths—and finally making him the butt of a variety of practical jokes, more calculated however to excite than to hurt him.

On his side, the Prince Regent amused himself in several ways. Sometimes he raced and chased after the young ladies—at others he threw himself panting and puffing upon a sofa, one of the aristocratic beauties acting the part of Hebe and bringing him a delicious beverage in a crystal cup. Or else, he would suddenly assume a thoughtful and sentimental demeanour,—either taking a seat at a distance, or else leaning pensively against a pillar,—so as to entice the ladies towards him: and then, as they gathered around him again, he would abruptly seize hold of the nearest—fling his arms about her—and cover her with kisses, amidst the pealing laughter and delighted cries of all the rest.

For upwards of ten minutes did Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon continue peeping through the blinds—their heads still remaining in that contact which we have before noticed. The spectacle within the saloon was, of a surety, sufficient to inflame their imaginations: and it certainly produced this effect. Moreover, on the one hand Sir Douglas Huntingdon was in such an attitude that by casting down his eyes he could plunge his looks amidst the treasures of Venetia's glowing bust: and on the other hand, the lady herself, by casting an occasional sidelong glance at her companion's profile, was led to the reflection that he was really much handsomer than she had even supposed him to be.

"What think you of that spectacle?" she suddenly exclaimed, raising her head from the blinds: and as her looks met those of the baronet, the colour deepened upon her cheeks.

"I can only say that I regret we have not some artificial flowers here in this ante-room," replied Sir Douglas: "as your ladyship might in that case condescend to practise the same innocent pastime with me."

"It is a punishment, and not as a jest, that I throw this at thee," exclaimed Venetia, suddenly detaching a bouquet from the corsage of her dress, and tossing it towards the baronet.

"Ah! then it is as a revenge, and not as a mere insolent liberty, that I treat your ladyship *thus*," returned the baronet: and suddenly throwing his arms around Venetia's neck, he pressed his lips to her's.

She received the caress without resentment, certainly—although perhaps she did not exactly return it. But in the look which she flung upon the baronet, as she disengaged herself from his arms, there was something which elevated his hopes to a frenzied height.

"Begone now," she said hastily: "let not the Prince suppose that you have been lingering here with me."

This very remark at once seemed to place the lady and the baronet upon the most familiar footing, by implying as it were that a secret had suddenly sprung into existence between them. Intoxicated with the thought that Venetia—the brilliant, beauteous, incomparable Venetia—would yet bestow her favours upon him, Sir Douglas Huntingdon snatched up her hand—pressed it to his lips—and then hurried from the room.

Almost immediately afterwards the Prince came forth from the saloon, carefully closing the glass-door behind him: and perceiving Venetia's flushed cheeks and palpitating bosom, he attributed her excitement to no other cause than the voluptuous spectacle which he had indeed purposely brought her hither to view in the hope that it would inflame her passions to a maddening height.

"Come with me, adored one," he murmured, as he pressed his mouth to those lips that still bore the imprint of the baronet's far more welcome caress: then fixing upon her a look all burning with desire, the royal voluptuary led his mistress away to his own suite of apartments.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE KING'S BENCH.

At the period of which we are writing, the authority of the Secretary of State had not invaded the King's Bench Prison with those innovations, encroachments, and changes which have since robbed that establishment of all its peculiar glory. The immense enclosure had not then been divided into different compartments and yards, respectively appropriated for the degrees and grades of insolvency and indebtedness: but the Bench was then indeed in its glory—as the cesspool of the West-end of London!

Resembling an enormous barrack standing in the midst of spacious grounds, girt by a wall of the same height as the edifice itself, and covered

with those revolving iron-spikes that are technically termed *chevaux-de-frise*,—having also several detached buildings, such as the State House, the Coffee House, and the Kitchen,—and with the principal portion of the grounds themselves divided into racket courts—such was the King's Bench Prison.

But there were many features connected with the place which were celebrated *then*—have been celebrated until very late years—and *still* remain doubtless memorable in the minds of thousands and thousands who have passed through the ordeal of captivity there. For instance, there was the strong room, in which obstreperous prisoners were confined,—the chapel, where the parson preached to the clerk, and the clerk said "amen" to the parson, for want of a congregation,—the little market-place close by the kitchen, — and the three pumps which marked the limits of each racket-ground, the central pump being dignified with the name of the Dolphin. Then there was the Tap, where the genuine beverage brewed by Barclay and Perkins found shoals of customers from morning to night: and at the other extremity of the building, there was another public room for the sale of beer, and bearing the sign of the Brace. Moreover, in the coffee-house there was an apartment enjoying the aristocratic distinction of the Wine Room, although considerably smaller and a trifle less comfortable than the parlour of a fifth rate pot-house out of doors.

These and several other features connected with the Bench, are cherished in the memories of thousands and thousands up to the present day: and now, as some old prisoner takes his lonely walk up and down the melancholy parade, he sighs as he recals to recollection those times when that parade and the adjacent racket-grounds were swarming with life—when the whole scene was rather that of a fair than of a prison—and when the voices of revellers in the tap, players and betters at racket, merry fellows shouting from the windows, and itinerant venders of all kinds of comestibles, mingled strangely together and filled the air.

There were, also, until late years, some curious characters within the walls of the King's Bench Prison. First and foremost was a stout, bluff-looking, red faced man, not unlike a sailor in his build and rolling walk. This was Yorke, the crier,—whose avocations consisted in escorting visitors to the rooms of friends whom they came to see—crying things that were lost, or making announcements of festivities that were to take place either at the Tap or the Brace—and performing all kinds of odd jobs for anybody who was able to pay him. Next, as the presiding genius of the Market-place, might be seen a tall, gaunt, scraggy old woman, with a very weather-beaten face and a nose and chin that nearly met, like the profile of old Mother Hubbard in the picture-books. The female of whom we are speaking, was known as Old Nanny: and she sold fish, vegetables, and anything else by which she could turn "a decent penny." She generally wore either a man's great coat or else an old brown cloak; and a black bonnet as rusty as a japanned coal-scuttle that has been very much neglected, was perched so airily and jauntily on the top of her head that one would really have thought Old Nanny was a coquette in her way.

In a sentry-box at the entrance of the innermost lobby, invariably stood from morning to night a most dreadful-looking old man, with his face twisting itself up into all kinds of malignant, spiteful, and ferocious expressions. He wore upon his head a great fur cap which gave him, when viewed from a considerable distance, a false air of the Lord Mayor's Swordbearer. This nasty-looking veteran-prisoner was called Old Sims, and he posted himself in that sentry-box that he might obtain alms from visitors entering the place, to attract whose notice he was wont to shake a few pence in a great tin box with a hole in the top to receive any additional pence which the hand of benevolence might drop in.

Several other remarkable characters were there; —and to a new comer entering the place as a prisoner, as well as to every one having business there as a visitor, were all the above local features and human curiosities duly pointed out. Of the latter species we must not forget to observe that there were several rare specimens in the shape of gentlemen who had been there for ten, twenty, or even thirty years, and who could get out at any moment they chose, but who unaccountably preferred dwelling within those spike-crowned walls.

Such was the King's Bench in the time of which we are writing; and indeed, the description would hold good down to a period of about eight or ten years ago. But, as we have above hinted, the ruthless hand of official authority suddenly annihilated all indulgences and liberties with one fell swoop. Were an equally sweeping reform to be applied to all the great institutions of this country, incalculable advantages would be the speedy result.

On being arrested at the suit of Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker, for the sum of five thousand guineas, Colonel Malpas was borne off to the spunging-house of Mr. Moses Ikey in Fetter Lane. There he remained for nearly three weeks, in the hope of being able to come to a settlement with his creditor: but vainly did he apply to his wife's relations—they sent him no answer. Vainly also did he address himself to some of his fashionable friends: the affair at the banquet and the chastisement he received from Captain Tash had got whispered abroad, and the Colonel found himself cut accordingly. The propositions which he made to Mr. Emmerson were likewise treated with silent contempt; and when he wrote a letter full of penitence to the Countess of Curzon, it was returned to him unopened in a blank envelope—the handwriting of the address having been to her ladyship a sufficient indication from whom the missive came.

Perceiving, therefore, that he had no immediate chances of extricating himself from his difficulties, and finding it too expensive to remain any longer at the establishment of Mr. Moses Ikey, where the meanest and nastiest fare was served up at the dearest and most exorbitant rate,—the Colonel resolved to move over to the King's Bench. His solicitor accordingly obtained the necessary writ of *Habeas Corpus*: the Colonel and his portmanteau were consigned to a hackney-coach, under the care of a tipstaff;—and in due course the aforesaid Colonel and portmanteau were deposited in the upper lobby of the far-famed prison. There he was at once called upon to pay a certain amount for gate-fees: and having done this, it

was suggested to him that "all gentlemen as called themselves gentlemen were accustomed to behave as sich and treat the turnkeys." To this farther drain upon his exchequer the Colonel likewise submitted; and he enjoyed the supreme satisfaction of having his health drunk by the three thirsty-looking turnkeys belonging to the upper lobby, and the two hungry and thirsty-looking turnkeys annexed to the lower lobby.

He was now escorted to the coffee-house, where, upon inquiry, he found that he could be accommodated with a bed-room—which bed-room, upon inspection, turned out to be about the same dimensions as an ordinary clothes-press. However, the Colonel was compelled to submit to the necessity of the case: and it being now five o'clock in the afternoon, he inquired what he could have for dinner. The reply was "anything he chose to order:" but it subsequently proved that a steak or a chop would come most conveniently within the culinary capabilities of the establishment.

Having accordingly agreed upon the materials for his dinner, the Colonel sate down, dolefully and despondingly enough, to read the newspaper in the wine-room. But scarcely had he commenced the perusal of a ponderous leading article on nothing at all, when he was startled by the sudden bursting forth of a stentorian voice just outside the window. He listened, and heard the following announcement duly and deliberately made:—

"O yes! O yes! O yes! This is to give notice that if any body has found an old pair of black breeches, new seated, which was took from the winder of Mac Hugh the tailor's room, Number 3 in 10 Staircase, and will bring them to the crier, he shall receive a pot of half-an-half for his trouble and no questions axed. God save the King!"

Old Yorke—for he it was who gave forth this very interesting and exciting announcement—paused for a few moments—cleared his voice from a little huskiness that had seized upon it through too powerful a vociferation—and then communicated another piece of intelligence to the admiring denizens of the Bench:—

"Oyes! O yes! O yes! Know ye all whom it may consarn, and take notice, that a Free-and-Easy will be held to-night in the Brace, for the benefit of Mr. Peter Sniggles, who had the misfortune to cut his head open by falling dead drunk down No. 10 Staircase. The cheer will be taken by Mr. Joseph Tubbs at 8 o'clock precisely, when several comic songs and other vocal harmony will take place. God save the King!"

Old Yorke then passed on from the vicinage of the Coffee House to repeat the announcements in other parts of the building; and the Colonel learnt from the waiter who brought in his dinner that those announcements were really genuine and seriously meant, and not a mere hoax, as Malpas had at first imagined them to be.

Having partaken of his meal, and while sipping the first glass of an execrable pint of Port, the Colonel was informed by the waiter that a gentleman wished to speak to him.

"Who is he?" inquired Malpas.

"Well, sir, he's a lawyer as is well known in this here place," answered the waiter, "and does a sight of business for genelmen in difficulties. He whispered to me to that he could get you out of quod in three or four days——"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Malpas, his countenance brightening up. "What is his name?"

"Mr. Joshua Jenkins," answered the waiter. "Shall I tell him to walk in?"

"By all means," responded the Colonel: "and bring a clean glass, as perhaps Mr. Jenkins will do me the favour to take some wine with me."

The waiter slid out of the room with a most praise-worthy alacrity, considering that he had to drag with him a pair of shoes down at the heels and a great deal too large for his feet. In a few minutes he returned, escorting a short seedy-looking individual, with very dirty linen and an unmistakable Jewish countenance. In fact, the personal appearance of this gentleman was by no means such as would have induced a cautious individual to trust him to get change for a five-pound note. The Colonel, therefore,—surprised and disgusted at this unpromising aspect of the man of business,—received him in a somewhat frigid and haughty fashion, just barely inviting him to be seated, but not choosing to take any notice of the circumstance of an extra glass being placed upon the table. Mr. Joshua Jenkins was however a gentleman of the free and easy school; and at once drawing a chair close up to the table, he observed, "Well, Colonel, so you are lumbered at last!"

"You speak as if you knew me, sir," remarked Malpas, surveying him with undisguised disgust.

"Oh! I know everybody by name about town," replied Mr. Joshua Jenkins, with a cunning leer: "and therefore it was not likely that the fashionable name of Malpas should remain strange to me. In fact, I knew when you was locked up over at Ikey's; and I should have come to see you there, but I thought by your stopping at such a place you was making arrangements to get out. Now, however, that you have come over here I thought it high time to introduce myself. So here's better luck to you, Colonel," added Mr. Jenkins, coolly filling the glass and raising it to his lips: then with a familiar nod across the table, he tossed off the contents.

"And pray, sir," inquired the Colonel, sinking back perfectly aghast at this King's Bench ease and hail-fellow-well-met unceremoniousness,—"and pray, sir," he repeated in his usual drawling tone, "what can you do for me?"

"Get you out of quod," replied Jenkins, with a knowing wink as he refilled his glass.

"Do you, then, know anybody who is likely to lend me five thousand guineas?" inquired Malpas, surveying the seedy-looking lawyer with an expression of mingled incredulity and superciliousness.

"Not I indeed," returned Jenkins. "I suppose you would not pay the debt if you could; but would rather get out, snap your fingers at your creditor, run over to France, and make him take a farthing in the pound."

"But is it possible to manage this?" exclaimed Malpas, somewhat staggered by the air of decision which the attorney assumed.

"To be sure it is," was the still more positive response.

"And how?" demanded Malpas, looking and speaking more civilly.

"By bail," rejoined Mr. Jenkins: and he tossed off two glasses of wine in rapid succession.

"Ah! I have heard, by the bye, that something

could be done in this way," said Malpas, catching eagerly at the suggestion.

"To be sure it can," continued the attorney: then tapping his prominent nose with his very dirty forefinger, and looking what may be termed greasily knowing with his oily countenance, he said, "You are arrested on mesne process; and of course by putting in an appearance and plea you can keep off judgment. Well then, by appearing to the writ it is as much as to say that you mean to defend the action and go to trial; and by meaning to go to trial, you can put in bail in the interval. This is what is called *justifying*: and it's easy done now, as the bail would have to go before the Judge in chambers——"

"But I cannot get any two persons to put bail in for me to such an amount," observed Malpas. "Remember that I am detained here for five thousand guineas——"

"Well, and you must have two bail each able to prove himself worth ten thousand," returned Mr. Jenkins.

"Two men worth twenty thousand guineas between them!" ejaculated Malpas, in despair. "I cannot obtain such security."

"But I can," said Mr. Jenkins, slily and drily.

"You can?" ejaculated Malpas, starting with joy.

"Yes — to be sure," responded Jenkins. "In fact, I brought in with me just now a couple of bail for you to look at: and I think they are just the very thing."

"Good heavens!" cried the Colonel, in amazement: "do you inspect bail in the Bench just as you do horses at Tattersall's?"

"Aye—and a precious sight keener too, when you want to see whether they will pass muster," said Mr. Jenkins. "So if you like to give me a hundred guineas—that is to say, forty for each of the bail to put in their pockets, and twenty for myself—the job shall be done; and in less than a week you shall be out."

"But is it possible," cried the Colonel, more and more bewildered, "that any two wealthy gentlemen, worth ten thousand guineas each, can be moved by such a paltry consideration as forty pounds, to incur so vast a risk on my account?"

"O yes," said Mr. Jenkins, with a peculiar smile: "the two chaps that I have got along with me here this evening, would bail the devil if he would only pay them for it."

"You surprise me!" cried the Colonel. "But where are these two immensely rich money-making gentlemen?"

"I left them in the Tap, eating bread and cheese and onions: and I paid for a pot of half-and-half for them to enjoy themselves," coolly answered Mr. Joshua Jenkins.

The Colonel started with the sudden indignation of one who thought he was being bantered: but as a sudden idea struck him and the real truth flashed to his comprehension, he said, "I suppose then that these people are what you call *straw bail?*"

"Just so," replied Mr. Jenkins. "I am astonished you did not twig it all along. Lord bless you, it's as easily done as possible. I'll give you a proof. About a year ago a nobleman owing three thousand pounds was arrested by Simon the money-lender up at the West End. The nobleman's father offered Simon fifteen shillings in the pound: but Simon obstinately refused anything less than the whole. Well, so the nobleman sent for me. I dressed up a tinker and a dog's-meat-man in fine clothes—paid their rates and taxes for them—took them up before a Judge—made them swear they were each worth six thousand pounds—and so justified bail for the young nobleman. He was let out and bolted to Guernsey, where he remained while I made terms with Simon for him. And now, sir, how much do you think that Simon was glad to take after all?"

"I really can't say," returned Malpas: "perhaps seven and sixpence in the pound?"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Mr. Jenkins. "I made him take five farthings in the pound and stand a bottle of wine into the bargain. So you see how easy these kind of things can be done."

"I do indeed," replied the Colonel. "But is it possible that the Judge could be so easily duped?"

"Not he!" exclaimed the attorney. "His lordship knows devilish well that when bail go up to justify for ten thousand pounds, they are not really worth ten pence: he knows too that the very clothes they wear at the time are only lent them for the occasion:—but he is obliged to take their oaths that they are worth so much, provided the solicitor on the other side can't show the contrary. And *we* take devilish good care, Colonel, that nothing of the kind *shall* be shown at all! Why, would you believe it, I have had that tinker and that dog's-meat-man up for bail so often, any time during these last fourteen years, that their faces are as well known to every one of the Judges and every one of the Judges' Clerks, as they are to me or to their own wives: and it is really quite amusing to see how solemnly the Judge always looks these fellows in the face, as if he had never seen them before in all his life, and how he appears to take in as gospel all they tell him about their immense resources. But I don't always take up the same bail: that would be coming it rather too strong—particularly as there is always something different as to their profession or trade every time they do go up. I have got a dog-fancier—I might even call him a dog-stealer, without telling a lie—and he's a capital bail, with the impudence of brass. The week before last he went up, and the Judge says, '*Well, sir, what are you?*'—'*A merchant, my lud,*' was the prompt answer: and then he went on to describe of what his merchandize consisted, heaping together more silks, brocades, and costly stuffs than you read of in the Arabian Nights. Well, last week he went up again; and it happened to be the same Judge in chambers. '*Now, sir, what are you?*' asked the Judge, looking for all the world as if he had never seen such a face before.—'*I am a farmer and grazier in Scotland, my lud,*' was the dog-fancier's instantaneous reply: and he went on to describe the thousand head of cattle that grazed upon his hills, and the ten thousand sheep that fed upon his pastures. So of course it was all right again. Well, at the beginning of this week I took him up once more; and it happened to be the very self-same Judge as on the two former occasions. '*Now, sir, what are you?*' asked his lordship, so polite and civil as if he no more saw through the dodge than the babe unborn.—'*I am an Oporto wine-merchant, my lud,*' replied the dog-fancier, coolly; and he went on to

describe how he had got fifty pipes of Port wine in the Channel Islands, ready for the English market, and how he had already refused sixty guineas a-piece for them. Of course he was accepted: and so you see, Colonel Malpas, that I am pretty successful in the bail that I take up. In fact, I can give you plenty of references to prove that I am the best Straw Bail Agent in London. And now, with your permission, I'll ring the bell for another pint of wine."

No sooner said than done: the wine was brought —and while Mr. Joshua Jenkins discussed it, the bargain was confirmed relative to the bail by the Colonel paying twenty guineas down and agreeing to deposit eighty more in the hands of the master of the coffee-house, to be duly handed over to Mr. Jenkins aforesaid on the bail passing the scutiny of the Judge. Mr. Jenkins then took his leave; and Colonel Malpas remained for a short time alone, to ponder over the singular statements he had heard from the lips of the lawyer.

But in a few minutes the door was suddenly burst open; and five or six individuals, of shabby genteel appearance, rushed one upon the heels of another into the Wine-room. They evidently thought that this noisy and unceremonious mode of entrance was highly diverting—for they laughed boisterously, as they flung themselves upon the benches at the table nearest to that where the Colonel was sitting.

Almost immediately afterwards the waiter made his appearance, saying, "Now, genelmen, give your orders"—but in a tone which showed that he did not highly admire his customers.

"Well, what shall it be?" cried one, appealing to his companions.

"Oh!" glasses of negus round," said another. "There are six of us. Come, waiter—half-a-dozen glasses of negus. Look sharp!"

"O yes, sir, I am looking sharp enough," responded the waiter: "but I want to see the money before I serve the lush."

"What cursed infernal impudence!" ejaculated the one who had first spoken. "Who the devil ever thinks of asking a gentleman for money? For my part," he added, "I have left my purse up in my room—which is deuced imprudent, by the bye, seeing it is full of gold and bank-notes."

"And as for my purse," remarked another of the delectable party, fumbling in his pocket, "it has got through a hole down into the linings of my breeches, and I sha'n't be able to fish it up until I take my small-clothes off. It's deuced provoking: for I've got at least five pounds of small change in it, and should have been delighted to stand treat."

"Well, upon my word, we seem to be out of luck," exclaimed the third member of the party: "for I've got nothing but a bank-note for a hundred guineas," he continued, drawing out an old brown silk purse with a playbill rustling in one end: "and there's no chance of getting change for such a heavy piece of flimsey in this place to-night."

"Deuce take it!" cried the fourth: "if I had known that you were all exposed to such inconveniences as these, I would not have lent that twenty guineas just now to Lord Smigsmag. But really it was impossible to refuse his lordship under the circumstances."

"Oh!" exclaimed the fifth: "don't make yourselves uneasy, I've got plenty of money about me!"—and thus speaking, he thrust his hands with all confidence into his breeches' pocket: then suddenly starting as if alarmed by a chimney falling or a cry of *fire*, he vociferated, "By heavens! I have lost my purse—I have lost my purse!"—and he affected to be in a tremendous rage.

"Now, was there ever anything so regularly unfortunate?" exclaimed the sixth member of this precious group, drawing forth the remains of a cheque-book from which a great number of drafts had been cut out. "Here am I, not only able but also willing to write you a cheque for a cool hundred or two, just as you like: but now it is after business hours in Lombard Street—and so it's all the same as if I had not a twopenny-piece in all the world at my banker's."

"Well, it raly is wery provoking," exclaimed the waiter, with a covert sarcasm in his tone, "to see six genelmen all so well-to-do in their circumstances and so full of blunt as you are, and not able just at this present speaking to raise six shillings between you all."

"It *is* provoking—very," said one of the party, looking full at Malpas; "and if I knew any body who would just lend me as much as six shillings till to-morrow morning, I would send them into him with my card and a note of thanks just as he sate down to his breakfast."

The Colonel, who was too wide-awake not to see through the characters of the six gentlemen, made no remark, and indeed affected not to observe that any hint had been thrown out towards himself.

"Did you speak, sir?" said the foremost of the party, now boldly addressing the Colonel, but with a very bland look and polite bow.

"No, sir—I said nothing," replied Malpas, somewhat sulkily.

"There — by heavens! the gentleman is a trump," vociferated the previous speaker: "he offers to treat us to glasses of negus round! Come, waiter, look alive: the gentleman is anxious to pay his footing—and we are anxious to drink his health."

The Colonel was so taken aback by the cool impudence of this proceeding, that he could not return a negative to the inquiring look which the waiter threw upon him: and this functionary, acting upon the principle that silence gives consent, at once shuffled away to execute the order.

"New-comer, sir?" said one of the party to the Colonel.

"Yes—I am sorry to say so," responded Malpas, not deeming it prudent to treat his fellow-prisoners with any marked coolness.

"Going to stay here long?" asked another.

"In for much?" blandly inquired a third.

"Going through the Court?" mildly asked a fourth.

"Or going to bail out?" said a fifth.

"If you stay here any time," observed the sixth, "you'll want a room. Now, as there are only about a hundred and twenty rooms in the place, each not large enough to swing a cat in, and seven hundred prisoners to live in them all, it's rather a difficult thing to get a room to one's self at any price. But as you seem to be a regular gentleman and are standing this negus in so handsome a manner,

I shouldn't mind letting you have *my* room for about a couple of guineas a week."

But before the Colonel had leisure to answer a single one of the above questions, or give any reply to the proposal concerning the room, the waiter made his appearance with the negus; and the conversation thereupon seemed to take a new impulse and flow into a variety of other channels.

"Now, my good fellow," said the foremost of the party, addressing himself to the Colonel in terms as familiar as if he had known him from childhood, —"while drinking your health I must beg of you not to take on too much on account of this imprisonment. Lord bless you! it's nothing when you are accustomed to it! Look at me now."

Colonel Malpas did as he was desired, but could not help thinking that there was nothing very agreeable or pleasant to contemplate in the appearance of a bloated, dissipated, rakish-looking fellow, with long dry dirty hair, and linen that seemed to imply that he had forfeited the confidence of his washerwoman.

"Well, you see me?" continued this individual: "and such as you see me, so I am," he added, thus enunciating a self-evident proposition. "I am just twenty-seven years old, and I've been six years in this place. When I came of age I had twenty thousand pounds, all of which I spent in nine months. For three months I played at hide and seek—then I got taken and locked up here—and here I've been ever since, and am likely to remain God knows how much longer. That's what I call life:"—and he burst out into a fit of uproarious laughter, in which his five companions as boisterously joined.

"Well, I've seen a little of life too," remarked the second. "When I came of age I had a thousand pounds, and made everybody believe that I had got a fortune of fifty thousand. So I lived in glorious style—got into debt as much as people would let me — kept hunters, race-horses, and hounds—drove my four-in-hand—gave champagne parties—had a town-house, a country-house, a crib down at Newmarket, another at Melton, and a shooting-box in the Highlands—and thus kept up a roaring game for two years. At last the smash came. Everthing went to the dogs—and I was brought over here. That was eight years ago: and here I've been ever since. Now, wasn't that a lark?" he exclaimed, laughing most joyously at this unblushing revelation of his rascality, while his boon companions joined in his mirth.

"Well, I did even better than that," said the third: "for when I came of age I hadn't a blessed farthing in the world. But I bought a precious large pair of whiskers and mustachios in the Burlington Arcade—clapped a long jingling pair of spurs upon my heels—wore a frogged coat—stuck my hat jauntily over my right ear—and called myself *Captain*. Thus decorated personally and titularly, I took up my abode at Long's Hotel and lived in the most sumptuous manner. The fashionable jewellers were delighted to supply *the Captain* with all he wanted in the shape of watches, chains, rings, and so on: and *the Captain* borrowed their full value on them from that accommodating relative—*his uncle*. Things went on well enough in this manner for nearly a twelvemonth; and I was on the point of marrying an heiress with a hundred thousand pounds, when the very night before the happy morning, I unfortunately left my pocket-book behind at the house of my intended. Her papa and mamma—like prying old folks as they were—could not resist the curiosity of peeping inside, just to catch a glimpse of *the Captain's* little secrets: when, lo and behold! to their astonishment and dismay, they found the said pocket-book crammed with pawnbrokers' duplicates. Early next morning—just as I was dressing for my bridal—not having previously missed the pocket-book, nor suspecting the storm which was about to burst over my head,—a parcel was put into my hand by the head waiter at Long's. I tore it open—and out dropped the fatal pocket-book, accompanied by a note from my intended's papa, couched in terms which always make me feel very uncomfortable when I think of them. Of course it was all up with the matrimonial scheme: the landlord of Long's arrested me for my bill—I was brought to the Bench—and here I have been vegetating for the last four years. How the devil I shall ever get out—not daring to face all those jewellers in the Insolvent's Court—I really don't know—nor yet particularly care:"—and this conclusive observation was the signal for another uproarious burst of laughter.

"Ah! my career was equally short—perhaps not so brilliant—and most assuredly ten thousand times more foolish," exclaimed the fourth of this delectable party, when the laughter had again subsided. "On coming of age I received thirty thousand pounds of my own fortune, and married a young lady who had fifty thousand pounds as her fortune. But within three months after this marriage I was introduced to Madame Profligata, the celebrated actress: and though she is not half so good-looking as my own wife, yet I was fool enough to fancy that it was a very grand thing to have such a woman as my mistress. I accordingly made overtures, and came to an agreement to allow her a house, carriage, and five hundred a-year: but the very day after she was installed in her new dwelling, she told me that she could not possibly stir out for want of diamonds. I accordingly sent to the most fashionable jeweller to bring up some sets of brilliants; and I offered Madame a present of gems valued at about a thousand guineas. Thereupon she burst out laughing in my face, and told me if I meant to do things in a chandler's shop style we had better cut it at once. I trembled at the idea of being ridiculed before all the world by losing my mistress for such a trifle, and therefore allowed her to select diamonds to the amount of six thousand guineas. To be brief, Madame required so many valuables of all descriptions—had so many long-standing debts which must be paid—and went out shopping so incessantly—that in less than three months she positively wheedled me out of twenty thousand pounds. Her extravagance grew more unbounded as she perceived that I was soft and yielding; so that before we had been a-year together she had swallowed up not only my own fortune, but also my wife's. And now, speaking of my wife, I may as well state that she returned home to her friends, while I lived altogether with Madame. All my ready cash being gone, my insatiate mistress taught me how to raise money upon bills: and strange—almost incredible as it may seem—I negotiated in one year my own acceptances to the tune of eighty thousand guineas, for which all the value that we obtained was about three thousand in money — ten thousand in wine, which no-

body could drink—ten thousand in pictures, the veriest of daubs—and all the rest was absorbed in what was called *discount* and *commission*. At last, when my name was so regularly worn out that not a discounter would look at it, Madame picked a quarrel with me, and we parted. The very next day I heard that she had picked up another flat whom she took to live with her. As for myself, being immediately arrested on some of the bills falling due, I was brought over to the Bench; and being uncommonly hard up, I pocketted my resentment against Madame, and wrote to her to lend me fifty pounds, as I happened to be well aware that she had received five thousand two days before from her new lover. But she laughed in my messenger's face, and told him to go about his business. To conclude, I have been three years in this place—and during that period have beheld the arrival, not only of the flat who succeeded me in the favours of Madame Profligata, but also of four others who during the interval have successively been her paramours and her dupes. But never mind," he exclaimed, assuming an air of jollity which was not after all quite natural: "we must take things as we find them, and fling care to the dogs!"

"Yes—that's the only maxim to be followed in a place like this," said the fifth individual. "I suppose we have all been very gay and very foolish in our time. For my part, although now only in my twenty-sixth year, I have run through three fortunes amounting altogether to a hundred and fifty thousand guineas. The first was left me by my grandfather—the second by an uncle—and the third by my father: but I had a mania for aristocratic acquaintances—and what with playing at dice with Dukes, at ecarté with Earls, at cribbage with Counts, and billiards with Baronets, I got so completely plucked that I at last found myself here, and not a feather to fly with."

"And I suppose not one of your fine acquaintances has ever been in to see you?" observed the sixth individual. "Ah! that is just like them. Five years ago, on coming of age I inherited a fortune of fourteen thousands pounds; and a certain fashionable friend honoured me with an introduction to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. His Royal Highness, hearing I had come of age and inherited property which was at my own disposal, was pleased to smile upon me most graciously. The next gracious mark of the princely favour was a very gracious invitation to a select supper at Carlton House, where I was introduced to five or six of his Royal Highness's boon companions. After supper his Royal Highness was most graciously pleased to propose dice; and while playing with me, I could not help noticing that his Royal Highness was no mean adept at securing a die—or in other words, cheating most flagrantly. But who could tell a Prince that he was a downright sharper—especially such a gracious Prince as that, who robbed you before your very eyes in a style so well becoming the first gentleman in Europe! As a matter of course I submitted with the best possible grace to be thus graciously fleeced of all I possessed: and after five or six select little suppers at Carlton House, I was as thoroughly cleaned out by that same gracious Prince as it was possible for man to be. Finding myself thus agreeably and pleasantly ruined, and calling to mind the numerous promises which his Royal Highness had so graciously made to provide for me, I ventured to call at Carlton House and explain my exact position to that gracious Prince. He listened with his wonted suavity of look while I frankly declared how penniless I was and besought him to lose no time in fulfilling his generous intentions by bestowing a situation upon me. '*And so you have got no more money?*' his Royal Highness was most graciously pleased to observe.—'*Not a farthing, sir,*' I answered.—'*Then, damn your eyes,*' he exclaimed, becoming quite purple in the face, '*what the devil business have you here?*'—and turning upon his heel, he rang the bell for me to be shown out. Reduced to despair by this proceeding, and being painfully brought to the conviction that his Royal Highness was the most *ungracious* Prince in the world, I plunged headlong into all kinds of dissipation to drown care. Dissipation led to extravagance—extravagance to debt—and debt to the King's Bench, where I have been for the last four years, and mean to stop because I *can* manage to pick up a guinea by hook or by crook within these walls, which I should be somewhat puzzled to do outside."

Our readers will not have failed to observe that despite all their previous blusterings, vapourings, and boastings about well-filled purses, lost purses, lent money, cheque-books, and so forth, the half-dozen gentlemen really and truly were reduced to the sad alternative of living upon their wits, even within the walls of a debtor's gaol, where it might be thought that every body's wits were too sharp to permit the possibility of being lived upon by any save their owners. It will likewise have been observed that when once the half dozen comrades had induced the Colonel to treat them to the negus—or rather, had succeeded in obtaining it in his name—they very freely put him in possession of the incidents of their past lives. Finally, as their tales and conversation served to while away the Colonel's time, he encouraged their garrulity by a fresh supply of negus; and in this manner did the party continue chatting and drinking until eleven o'clock, when the lights were put out in the Coffee-room.

Malpas then went up to bed: and the six friends strolled forth "to make the tour of the whistling shops"—or in other words, to visit every room where gin (prohibited by the gaol-regulations) was sold on the sly.

CHAPTER LXIX.

A SCENE IN THE DARK.

We must now return to Jocelyn Loftus and Laura Linden, whom we left together in the dead of night and in the utter darkness of a chamber at the Prefecture of Police.

The reader will remember that the young lady declared it to be utterly impossible for her to pass through the opening into her own apartment: and it had been agreed that she was to remain in our hero's chamber until daylight should enable them to enlarge the aperture—for be it recollected that they dared not light the candles again after the peremptory command and undisguised menace of the watchman.

The moment Jocelyn thus found that it was ab-

solutely necessary—or at least, to all appearances—that Laura should remain until dawn in his apartment, he again rose as it were superior to the perplexities of his situation; and in the calm and courteous tone of a gentleman who wishes to show that his aim is to observe the most delicate consideration towards a female-companion, he said, "Miss Linden, I pray you to use my couch as a sofa—and I will envelope myself in my cloak and repose in the arm-chair between the windows."

This observation was significant enough; inasmuch as the position which Loftus thus specified, and to which he at once felt his way in the dark, placed the whole length of the room between himself and Laura Linden. Accordingly, enveloping himself in his mantle, Loftus threw himself in the arm-chair: and for a few minutes a profound silence reigned in the apartment.

"Is not this a most romantic and singular adventure?" said Laura at length—in that low, tremulous, and half plaintive voice which is oft-times woman's most dangerous weapon, inasmuch as it steals insidiously into that heart from which the more boldly played artillery of other charms has innocuously rebounded.

"It is one of those incidents which are more frequently encountered in novels than in real life," answered Loftus, sorry in his heart that the previously prevailing silence was thus broken by renewed discourse: and at the same time it struck him that the young lady's voice had undergone some slight change since she had last spoken;—indeed a vague and undefined suspicion stole gradually into the breast of our young hero, that this voice, as he had last heard it, was not altogether unknown to him.

"What would the world think if it knew of this adventure?" continued Laura, her voice appearing as if it were passing from a previously feigned to a now more natural tone—as if she either forgot

that she had previously been disguising that voice somewhat, or as if she were now purposely allowing it to resume its wonted intonation.

"The world will never know from my lips any thing that might be disagreeable or unpleasant," observed Jocelyn, a vague feeling of uneasiness now coming over him as his suspicions relative to the voice grew stronger and stronger.

Not that he could yet call to mind where he had ever heard that voice before, even if he had really ever heard it at all until this night: but he was full certain that it was undergoing a gradual change from an assumed melody to its natural one.

"Ah! you do not think, Mr. Loftus," observed Laura, her voice becoming more tremulous, as if vibrating with some strong feeling or growing passion,—"you do not think that the world would give us credit for being such a good girl and boy as we really are? You fancy that the world, like a too suspicious parent, would be certain to believe that we have been naughty children?"

"Heavens, Miss Linden!" exclaimed Loftus, shocked at the gross indelicacy of the remark, and therefore speaking in a tone of unmistakable displeasure, "let us not talk in this strain! Indeed, unless you compose yourself to sleep, you will be thoroughly exhausted with fatigue and totally unfit to encounter all that we may have to accomplish to-morrow night."

"It is impossible to sleep with a strong current of air coming through this aperture," said Laura: and Jocelyn could hear by the elastic bound of her feet alighting upon the floor, that she had leapt from the couch.

"Permit me to do my best to stop that aperture," he said, rising from his seat and slowly advancing through the darkness towards the alcove. "Perhaps I can replace the panel of the wainscot in such a manner as to protect you from the draught."

"I do not believe it possible," said Laura, in a tone which evidently came from lips that were pouting with subdued ill-humour at the moment.

"Then let us light a candle at any risk——"

"Ah! doubtless for you to see my face, now that you know the veil is off!" she cried, with a merry laugh.

"I can assure you, Miss Linden, that I have no impertinent curiosity of such a nature," answered Jocelyn, in a voice coldly expressive of displeasure.

"Oh! no, no," ejaculated Laura, her humour suddenly changing again—and this time into a bitterness which she did not attempt to conceal: "you have no curiosity of any kind, Mr. Loftus—your heart is ice—ice to the very core! I declare that it is almost an insult to a young and beautiful woman, as I am, that you have not spoken to me a single word such as young gentlemen *do* speak to young ladies! There—you know what I mean—but I cannot explain myself any better. At all events, I feel slighted—neglected! Why don't you answer me, sir?" she exclaimed, with a petulance almost amounting to rage as she stamped her foot upon the floor.

"Heavens! what a little demoness," thought Jocelyn within himself: but in a cold and apparently unmoved manner, he said, "Miss Linden, you thanked me just now for the brotherly kindness which, as you were pleased to observe, I manifested towards you when you felt unwell: and therefore you will perceive the inconsistency of at present accusing me of deliberately slighting you."

"Answer me one question, sir," exclaimed Laura, hastily and impetuously: "do you wish to escape hence?"

"Most assuredly," replied Loftus. "But wherefore a question, so singular under the circumstances?"

"Because you cannot escape without my assistance," returned Laura: "and that assistance you are not so certain of having as you were just now."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Loftus, bewildered and chagrined: "is it possible that I have really offended you?"

"I have already told you," said Laura, in a voice that again became low, deep, and tremulous,—but whether with real or affected emotion Jocelyn knew not,—"I have already told you that men of the highest rank and most brilliant position have besieged me with their overtures—some upon honourable terms, others upon dishonourable—and while I have spurned the latter, I have steadily refused the former. But wherefore? Because in my own heart, I had already conjured up the ideal image of such a being as alone could win my love! To that idealism have I clung: it has been to me a dream and a worship—until at last I have felt that my very happiness depended upon its realization. I have pondered and pondered upon that image until I have led myself as it were to become desperately enamoured of it—and I have vowed that never, never, would I bestow my affections upon any one who did not realize in his person and his mind all that was beautiful, attractive, and endearing in that creation of my fancy. Conceive, then, my astonishment and my delight, when on passing ere now into this chamber, I beheld in *you* the personification of that delicious idealism!"

"Miss Linden, not another word—not another syllable in this strain, I conjure—I command you!" cried Loftus, in a tone but too plainly indicative of outraged feeling. "This scene reminds me of temptations, arts, and wiles to which I was exposed ere my captivity: and did I not believe that the three ladies to whom I now allude are far, far away from Paris, I should actually fancy that you were one of them," he added vehemently. "Therefore, Miss Linden, for heaven's sake, let us have no more of a scene which in truth is as derogatory to you as it is painful and revolting to me!"

"Mr. Loftus," interrupted Laura, suddenly assuming a tone of decision,—"I see that it is now necessary we should thoroughly understand each other: for you are more flinty-hearted than I had at first imagined."

"Yes — let us understand each other," said Loftus,—"since it would seem that we had mistaken each other's character,—I, in believing that you were a young lady of discretion as well as magnanimity—and you in supposing that I am unmindful of my duty alike to you and to myself."

"Oh! that we had a light!" exclaimed Laura Linden, sarcastically,—"so that I might see your contenance flushing with the virtuous indignation that is doubtless now reddening it."

"But for the explanations?" said Loftus, impetuously.

"They will soon be given, so far as I am concerned," answered Laura. "Anxious and longing

as I have been to effect my escape hence, yet that aspiration has now become secondary indeed to another hope which I have conceived, and on the fulfilment of which the former shall even be made to depend. For I am self-willed, Mr. Loftus,—yes, self-willed and headstrong as I am petulant and impetuous: and therefore you must know, in one word that I love you—and that if you scorn this love of mine, it shall turn to the bitterest hatred!"

"Miss Linden," observed Loftus, coldly indignant,—"you will provoke me to say things to which I should be sorry to give utterance."

"Mr. Loftus, if you mean war to the death, then war let it be!" cried Miss Linden: "but in that case, remember that I shall not hesitate to sacrifice myself in order to be revenged on you. I will therefore confess to the Prefect's servant in the morning all the preparations for escape which have been made——"

"Foolish young woman! you will draw down a terrible punishment upon yourself," ejaculated Loftus. "You will perhaps be moved to another and far more dreadful prison——"

"What of all that, so long as I gratify my revenge?" exclaimed Laura. "It is for you to decide whether you will provoke that vengeance, —whether you will continue to scorn, slight, and even insult me—or whether you will consent to gratify this whim I have conceived by becoming my lover for a week—a day—or only an hour, as you may choose? O Mr. Loftus, do not remain thus hard-hearted!—remember that I am beautiful —very beautiful—and the world will know naught of what takes place between us in an hour of yielding tenderness——"

"Temptress, who art thou?" exclaimed Jocelyn, now becoming angry and almost enraged: "thy voice is familiar to me—I am certain I have heard it before——"

"Yes," interrupted Laura, in a low tone: "and I have seen thee before—and I know more of thee than thou thinkest—and I could breathe in thy ear the name which ought to have been in the passport——"

"Then, who art thou?—tell me who thou art!" exclaimed our young hero, becoming more and more excited: "for there is something so strange—so mysterious in all this——"

"Stay—let me whisper a word to your ear," said Laura; "and you will then see that I know everything concerning you——"

"Speak aloud, Miss Linden!" cried Jocelyn, who perceived by the rustling of her dress that she was approaching him through the pitchy darkness which prevailed.

"Ah! you are afraid of me?" she exclaimed, scornfully. "Oh! what sickly sentimentalism—what a maudlin affectation of virtue is all this! Even the beauteous Louisa Stanley herself," she continued with a marked accentuation upon a name which made Jocelyn start suddenly,—"could scarce think well of one who seems not to be made of flesh and blood!"

"You have alluded to a young lady," said Loftus, "whose example it were well, Miss Linden, if you would follow. But let me beseech and implore you to put an end to a scene as derogatory as it is painful—as humiliating as it is ridiculous!"

There was a dead silence of nearly a minute: and then the lady's voice suddenly vibrated upon Jocelyn's ear, exclaiming, "Oh! I love thee—I love thee!"—and the next instant he heard her come bounding towards him like a serpent flinging its coils through the utter darkness at some object which a mysterious instinct impelled it to seize upon: so that ere Jocelyn had leisure to step back even a couple of paces, he was clasped in the arms of his midnight companion.

Violent was that embrace, as if the young lady's impassioned nature were wrought up to a frenzied pitch. The plump white arms were thrown so suddenly around his neck and held him in so firm a clasp, and the lips of the temptress were instantaneously glued to his own with so burning an intenseness, that it seemed as if it were impossible for him to escape from the empire of such an amazonian assailant. But immediately recovering his presence of mind, he endeavoured to disengage himself from her embrace, in which however she held him with all the greater tenacity. He used a little more violence—and then she clung to him with the force of desperation.

"Miss Linden—take care—I shall do you a mischief!" cried Jocelyn.

"You would not ill-use a woman," replied Laura: and she covered his face with frantic kisses, as if hurried away by the torrent of raging passions which she could not control.

"By heaven, this is intolerable!" cried Jocelyn. "O shameless young woman!"

"Ah! revile—abuse me as you will," said Laura, with a triumphant tone: "but I will either perish, or compel you to fall vanquished into the arms of my consummated desires!"

"You force me to extremes!" cried Loftus, now seizing both her arms and somewhat violently disengaging them from about his neck.

Laura struggled desperately to retain her hold—and Jocelyn could hear her gasping and moaning with rage, like a subdued tigress, when she found herself baffled and defeated in the conflict. But be it well understood that he exhibited not the slightest unnecessary violence towards her: he merely put forth his strength to a sufficient degree to unlock her arms from his neck. The struggle was nevertheless a difficult one, inasmuch as it took place in the depth of a pitchy darkness: and it was therefore no fault of our hero's, if Laura, suddenly tripping over a rug, fell heavily upon the floor—where she remained senseless.

For a few moments Loftus, though deeply grieved at this incident, fancied that her immoveability and silence were only a pretence: but finding that she continued thus still and speechless, he stooped down and laid his hand upon her forehead. It was cold—and there was a clammy perspiration upon it. Beginning to be seriously alarmed, he placed his hand upon her heart, and felt that though it beat, the pulsation was nevertheless slow and feeble. A mortal terror now seized upon him—for he feared that she might be in reality seriously injured and perhaps about to die; and for a few instants he felt so bewildered as scarcely to know what course to pursue.

But suddenly it struck him that under such circumstances he must not hesitate to procure a light at any risk. The resolve was adopted and executed—tinder, flint, steel, and matches were at hand—in another moment they were put into

requisition—and he accordingly at once proceeded to strike a light.

The candle was lighted—he held it over the countenance of the lady who was stretched upon the floor—and an ejaculation burst from his lips! Heavens—was it indeed possible?—and was the half-suspicion which he had ere now expressed, so signally confirmed?

But at that ejaculation which thrilled from his lips, the lady herself opened her eyes—looked up—and then gave vent to a wild cry of mingled disappointment, rage, and terror: for she saw that detection had overtaken her sooner than she had purposed or anticipated;—and thus did accident reveal to Jocelyn Loftus the identity of the false Laura Linden with the depraved though beautiful Julia Owen!

CHAPTER LXX.

THE PREFECT AND HIS GUESTS.

We must now inform our readers that on this same memorable night when Jocelyn Loftus and Laura Linden—*alias* Julia Owen—were thrown together, the Prefect of Police entertained a few special friends at a choice supper in the saloon belonging to his own magnificent suite of apartments.

The Prefect himself was in uniform, he having attended the Legislative Assembly that day in his ministerial capacity; and the gentlemen whom he was thus regaling with the elegant little banquet, consisted of his own two Private Secretaries, the Under-Secretary of State for the Department of the Interior, and three well-dressed young men who had no ostensible profession nor any visible sources of income, but who nevertheless lived well and cut an excellent figure in the French metropolis. In plain terms, these last mentioned individuals were pensioned spies, or *mouchards*, secretly attached to the Prefecture of Police.

We need hardly say that all the guests thus assembled were Frenchmen; and the conversation flagged not during the meal, as it usually does with Englishmen when similarly employed. On the contrary, the gastronomic proficiency of the Prefect's cook, displayed as it was in substantial specimens of the art now served up on massive silver dishes, afforded not only delicious food for the palate but also for the discourse. The wines were of the most exquisite description and circulated freely: but with true French refinement in apician indulgence and epicurean luxuriousness, the party lingered a long time over the banquet, drinking the healths of all the most beautiful women of the day, and pledging each other with brimming glasses and fervid pressures of the hand, in the true French style of cordial, heartfelt conviviality. Now, as it was eleven o'clock before this festival commenced, it was some time past midnight ere it terminated. The Prefect and his companions then passed into an adjoining saloon where the table was spread with a choice dessert—another and still more rare selection of wines—coffee—and burnt punch.

"I thought, my dear friend," said the Under-Secretary of the Interior, addressing the Prefect of Police, "that you promised to have that enormously rich English nobleman, the Marquis of Leveson, here to-night?"

"Such was my intention," responded the Prefect; "and I believe it will yet be fulfilled. The Marquis would have joined us earlier, but is obliged to be at the ball given by the British Ambassador to-night. He however promised that he would get away soon after twelve and then come and join us——"

"Is he making a long stay in Paris?" asked the Under-Secretary of State, whose name was Jules Martignac.

"He has been here about a fortnight, on business of a somewhat particular and delicate nature," returned the Prefect, with a meaning smile.

"No doubt M. Jules Martignac is as well acquainted with that business as ourselves," observed one of the Prefect's Private Secretaries.

"No, indeed I am not," exclaimed the Under-Secretary of State. "Of course I could be if I chose, inasmuch as there are no secrets at the Prefecture which are not known at the Ministry of the Interior. But to tell you the truth, I have been so very gay lately——"

"Ah! Jules, you have doubtless found a new mistress?" exclaimed the Prefect, laughing. "But was there ever such inconstancy as yours!"

"It is not in my nature to remain long faithful to any woman," observed Martignac, who was as vain and conceited as he was really handsome in person and elegant in manners. "But I was telling you that I have not lately had time to look over the secret reports from the Prefecture to the Ministry of the Interior—and therefore I am not entirely acquainted with the object of Lord Leveson's visit to Paris. An inkling thereof I have gleaned, it is true, from what has been said in my presence on two or three occasions, by the Minister and his Confidential Secretary——"

"Well," exclaimed the Prefect, who from the first moment he sate down to table with his friends, had thrown off all official reserve, and who now laughed heartily at the thoughts which the present discourse had conjured up in his mind,—"with regard to Lord Leveson's visit to Paris, I can safely say that of all the amusing incidents which ever came to my knowledge, certain matters involved in this affair are the most eminently diverting!"

"I presume his lordship's visit to our gay capital," said Jules Martignac, "is in some way or another connected with the mission of those three young English ladies—the Misses Owen, I mean—who were appointed to proceed to Italy in order to occupy certain situations about the person of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline?"

"That is to say, the wife of the present Prince Regent of England," added one of the gentlemen-spies.

"Precisely so," continued the Prefect. "Well, and then these three girls—these Misses Owen—fall in with a certain young gentleman calling himself Jocelyn Loftus: and he, with more generous candour than astute discretion, tells them in plain terms that he has embarked in the Quixotic enterprise of thwarting all their schemes and preventing them from proceeding to Italy to fulfil their mission."

"The insensate Englishman!" exclaimed Jules Martignac. "But after all, whether he had thus revealed his purposes to the young ladies, or not, would scarcely have signified in the long run: for the mo-

ment he set foot in Paris, every act and proceeding on his part was sure to become known to the authorities and be duly chronicled in the *Black Books* at the Prefecture. Ah!" added the handsome but affected official, "what a blessing it is to have such a well-ramified system of police as we have got!"

"But you must observe in this case, Jules," said the Prefect, "that it was not my business to trouble myself about Mr. Jocelyn Loftus or the Misses Owen unless in pursuance of the special wish of certain parties in England: and such wish was speedily intimated to our government. I need not remind you, my friends, that at the restoration of his Majesty Louis XVIII to the French throne in April last, a secret compact was made between this august monarch and the illustrious Prince Regent of England, to the effect that they should mutually forward, advance, and succour each other's interests, aims, and purposes to the utmost of their power. Hence it followed as a matter of course, that whatever project the Prince Regent of England might put in force with regard to his wife now in Italy, was certain to be privately aided and abetted by the government of his Majesty Louis XVIII. Now, when Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, with more candour than discretion, made known his chivalrous designs to the three Misses Owen, they at once wrote off to England for instructions: and the immediate consequence was a private communication from the Prince Regent to our own most gracious Sovereign, requesting that the person calling himself Jocelyn Loftus might be immediately arrested and detained in some secure place. As a matter of course, our excellent King, mindful of his compact with the Prince Regent, lost no time in complying with the demand: and the order to take the necessary steps in the matter was forthwith sent to me from the palace. Hereupon, I lost no time in causing the young man passing under the name of Loftus to be apprehended, on the ground that he was residing in France with a passport made out in a false name."

"And did not the police agent take possession of all the young Englishman's papers at Meurice's Hotel?" inquired Jules Martignac. "Methinks I heard something of the sort mentioned at the Ministry of the Interior——"

"As a matter of course," replied the Prefect: "all his correspondence was taken possession of and brought hither. The contents of those letters were not however very important, chiefly tending to show that Mr. Loftus was engaged to be married to a young lady named Louisa Stanley, who resides at Canterbury——"

"Ah! that's the capital of the beautiful county of Kent," exclaimed Jules Martignac. "For you know that I have visited England? Well, and I have passed a few days in that fine old city of Canterbury. Its cathedral is sublime! But pray proceed. What else did the letters and papers show?"

"That there was a Miss Mary Owen — the youngest sister of the girls whom we have already been speaking of——"

"Well—what of this Mary Owen?"

"Simply that she had run away from home, I believe—or else deserted her mother and sisters in some peculiar manner—and had found a refuge with that same Miss Louisa Stanley at Canterbury. These were the principal points developed by the letters and papers seized at Meurice's Hotel," continued the Prefect: "and not knowing how serviceable they might prove, I at once despatched them all to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent in London."

"But the three Owens who were on their way to Italy," inquired Martignac,—"have they not continued their journey?"

"Two of them have," responded the Prefect: "and have joined her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales by this time. They travelled under the escort of a certain Mrs. Ranger, who had charge of them——"

"But first, your Excellency should recollect," exclaimed one of the Prefect's Private Secretaries, "that even after the arrival of the instructions from England to arrest Mr. Loftus, it was deemed advisable that the three sisters should remain in Paris a few days, so as to await any fresh commands from England that might follow after the receipt of the letters and papers which were sent over to the Prince Regent."

"Exactly so," observed the Prefect: "and in due course the Marquis of Leveson came over himself."

"The London papers hinted at the time," remarked one of the gentlemen-spies, "that his lordship left England so suddenly to be out of the way while his niece's husband—a profligate fellow of the name of Dysart — was tried and hung. The statement was copied into all the French papers——"

"To be sure!" exclaimed the Prefect. "It was an excellent excuse for his lordship's sudden departure from England and visit to Paris. But I can assure you, from what I have heard the Marquis himself say, that he felt not the slightest sympathy on account of his niece's husband: and *we* know that his lordship really came over to Paris about this affair of the Owens and Jocelyn Loftus. Well, the day after his arrival he sent the two eldest young ladies —Miss Agatha and Miss Emma, I think their names are—he sent them, I say, post-haste forward on their journey to Italy, along with Mrs. Ranger. But he kept the youngest of the three girls, whose name is Julia——"

"I thought you just now said *Mary*," observed Jules Martignac.

"No, no," replied the Prefect. "Mary is the youngest of *all*, and is living with Miss Louisa Stanley at Canterbury. It is Julia, the youngest of the *three over in France*, whom the Marquis kept with him."

"The wicked old fellow!" exclaimed Jules. "But I have heard that these Owen girls are ravishingly beautiful——"

"True! But you are quite wrong in your present suspicions," interrupted the Prefect: "for the very same day that Miss Agatha and Miss Emma departed for Italy, Miss Julia was consigned a prisoner to the Prefecture——"

"Ha! ha! capital—was it not?" exclaimed the three gentlemen-spies and the two Private Secretaries, all rubbing their hands with the air of men who were relishing an excellent joke. "Only fancy that sweet pretty girl Julia Owen, being locked up in a gloomy room in the Prefecture!"

"Indeed! and what was that for?" demanded Jules Martignac, now completely at fault as to the meaning and motive of the circumstances just related.

"You must know in the first place," said one of

the gentlemen-spies with a peculiar look, "that it was entirely of her own accord."

"And after full deliberation with Lord Leveson," observed another of the *mouchards*.

"And it must be borne in mind that the room in which she is placed," added the third spy, "is next to that of the handsome young Englishman who chooses to pass under the very euphonious and romantic name of Jocelyn Loftus."

"By all means tell us about this!" exclaimed Jules Martignac. "It seems to be one of the most thoroughly romantic affairs I ever heard of."

"Well," said the Prefect, now resuming the discourse, "I must observe, *en passant*, that the English people, with the disgusting pride and arrogant self-conceit that is so natural to them, are exceedingly fond of denouncing the French as being utterly demoralized: but from the very incidents of which we are speaking, and a variety of others which have come to my knowledge, I can assure you my candid and honest impression is that the aristocratic and higher classes of English society are the most depraved, profligate, and licentious in all the world."

"But the affair of this Julia Owen and Jocelyn Loftus?" exclaimed Jules Martignac, who did not want a lecture upon morals: "is it so very racy?"

"You shall judge for yourself," replied the Prefect. "It appears that this same young gentleman whom we shall still continue to call by his pseudonym of Jocelyn Loftus, professes a stoical degree of virtue which has naturally given great offence in certain quarters, where licentiousness is thereby put to the blush. Now, when the Marquis of Leveson came over to Paris, it was privately whispered in his ear by Mrs. Ranger, that all the three sisters had become desperately enamoured of Jocelyn—but that Agatha and Emma had vainly attempted to thaw his ice-cold heart. The Marquis, having a particular reason for breaking down all the ridiculous scruples which have taken such a hold upon Loftus, became much interested in what Mrs. Ranger told him; and summoning the three sisters, he succeeded in wheedling out of the two eldest a confession of all the wiles, manœuvres, and artifices which they had adopted to ensnare the object of their passion;—while from young Julia's lips he elicited the avowal that she had not found an opportunity of trying the effect of *her* charms, but should rejoice at being enabled to enter on such a love-campaign. The mind of the Marquis was at once made up—his plans were settled—and he proceeded to put them into execution. Agatha and Emma were sent forward with Mrs. Ranger, as I have already told you, to join the Princess Caroline in Italy: and the Marquis then came to me with a request that Julia Owen might at once be placed in the next room to Jocelyn Loftus. As a matter of course his lordship explained his reasons for a proceeding which at the first glance struck even *me* as extraordinary. He represented how necessary it was to undermine that stoical virtue which led Jocelyn Loftus into such Quixotic extremes, and which would inevitably lead him, when he regained his liberty, not merely to thwart, but also blazon forth to the whole world the long-concerted plots and deeply-ramified intrigues that are now in progress relative to the Princess of Wales. It was quite clear, as the Marquis observed, that Jocelyn knew too much on that point; and the only way to render him powerless was to retain him in prison, or else drag him down from the pedestal of his exalted virtue. Now, to keep him for a very long time in custody would be to stand the risk of incurring great scandal: the thing might get mentioned by some Opposition Member in the Legislative Chamber; and the enemies of the government would make much of it. Therefore, as the Marquis reasoned, what scheme could be better than to inveigle the young man within the circle of those temptations to which he was more likely to become susceptible in a state of captivity than when free. '*He must be looked upon as a serpent whose sting is his* VIRTUE,' said the Marquis: '*let us rob him of that sting, and we render him powerless. We may thus defy him, whereas at present he is dangerous to a degree.*' Thus reasoned the Marquis of Leveson; and I not only understood his views, but cheerfully consented to assist them to the utmost of my power. Julia Owen was to be the temptress to allure the young man from the pinnacle of his lofty virtue: she was the sorceress whose spells were to entice him from the pedestal of his exalted chivalry. The first step in the singular drama was therefore to assign her to the chamber next to Jocelyn. This was done—and the girl entered with romantic delight upon the task, all the details and arrangements of which she promptly planned and chalked out. Knowing that it was vain to endeavour to work at once upon his animal passions, she resolved to appeal to his refined and delicate sentiments. She therefore purposed to introduce herself to him in the light of a heroine—secure his admiration—win his confidence—and thus establish herself firmly in his favour before she allowed him to discover who she really was. The char-woman who waits upon the prisoners in that gallery, was secretly ordered by me to further the designs of Miss Julia to the utmost of her power. To be brief, a variety of implements were supplied the young lady, to enable her to excavate an aperture in the wall, so that she might obtain entrance into Jocelyn's apartment. She would thus appear before him as his good genius—the heroine of an adventure promising escape for himself as well as for her——"

"Ah! then she would be revealing herself too abruptly," exclaimed Martignac,—"and before she was well assured of obtaining a strong hold on his confidence."

"All this was well weighed, considered, and calculated before-hand," returned the Prefect: "and, as a heroine ought to be a somewhat mysterious character, in order to inspire a deep interest as well as other engrossing sentiments, Miss Julia purposed to conceal her countenance in the folds of a thick veil—to disguise her voice—and to assume the sweetly romantic name of *Laura Linden*. The plan was altogether well-digested. Conceive an heroic young lady breaking at midnight through the wall into a young gentleman's chamber—amusing this young gentleman with some romantic tale to account for her captivity and anxiety to escape—seeking every little opportunity to play upon his senses and bewilder him with a strange mystification—then holding out to him the promise of immediate flight from dreary prisonage,—conceive all this, I say, and then you will admit that it must indeed be a heart of stone on which such seductive influences could fail

to make an impression. And now, Jules," continued the Prefect,—"and now what will you think when I tell you that *this* is the very night on which Julia Owen and Jocelyn Loftus are thus to meet. Yes—this very night is the curtain to rise upon the first act of the well-conceived drama: and indeed," added the Prefect, as he consulted his watch, "it is probable that they have already met—for 'tis near one in the morning!"

"But they are not really to escape together?" said Jules Martignac, inquiringly.

"Do you think me mad?" exclaimed the Prefect. "No, no—Jocelyn will remain here as long as his virtue continues stubborn: but if he yield to the temptations of the syren Julia, then may he go about his business—and welcome!"

"And how is the pretended endeavour to escape to be contravened?" asked Jules Martignac, delighted with the whole narrative.

"Not a link in the chain of the proceedings is deficient," responded the Prefect: "everything is duly weighed, considered, and pre-arranged. For instance, the watchman, as he goes his rounds, will suddenly command the lights to be extinguished in Jocelyn's chamber. The order will be given authoritatively and accompanied with menaces: and therefore the light *must be put out*. Now, what is the result! The young gentleman and the young lady are left together in the dark—and heaven only knows with what wiles, seductions, and blandishments the false Laura Linden will assail her very virtuous companion! At all events, this young man must be something more or less than human, if he resist the combined influences of such circumstances, temptations, and opportunities!"

"I think so too," observed the Under-Secretary of State, in a laconic tone, but with a salacious smacking of the lips. "And therefore, you say that if he does really succumb either this night, or on some early occasion——"

"Oh! once let him sink vanquished and overcome into the arms of Julia Owen," cried the Prefect, "and he can no longer hold up his head as the champion of virtue! Ashamed, disgraced, and degraded in his own estimation,—pulled down from the pedestal of his austere rectitude and immaculate chivalry,—he will either be glad to conceal his diminished head in some solitary nook,—or else, in an access of despair, will plunge deeper into the fount of bliss! And this latter theory is the more probable: for if the wiles, artifices, and seductions of the syren Julia once triumph, he will henceforth yield to the current of so irresistible an infatuation and devote all his thoughts to the beautiful mistress whom he will thus have gained—neither thinking of interference with the designs of the Prince Regent on the one hand, nor remaining bent upon contracting an unequal marriage with Louisa Stanley, on the other!"

"Ah! then there is an objection to this marriage, is there?" exclaimed Jules Martignac.

"Yes—I believe so," responded the Prefect. "But that appears to be altogether a minor consideration in comparison with the one grand aim of disarming him as to his interference with the mission of the Owens."

While the Prefect was yet giving utterance to the latter portion of this sentence, a valet entered the room: and the moment his master had ceased speaking, the servant advanced and whispered a few words in his ear.

"Good," said the Prefect: then waiting an instant until the valet had withdrawn, he observed, "Well, my friends, it is as I had anticipated: for the watchman has just sent in word that he saw Mr. Loftus examining the window, and that upon raising his voice to command the lights to be put out, he beheld the shadow of a female form reflected upon the opposite wall, as it flitted across the young Englishman's chamber."

"Oh! happy fellow," cried the Under-Secretary of State, "if he will but avail himself of the happiness within his reach!"

The door now again opened: but this time it was to usher in the Marquis of Leveson, who made his appearance in full evening costume, he having just quitted the mansion of the British Ambassador. As soon as the wonted greetings were exchanged between himself and the Prefect, and when also the nobleman had been duly presented to the assembled guests, he glanced significantly at the great police authority as if to inquire what news he had to impart relative to the affair that so particularly interested himself.

"We are all friends here, my lord," said the Prefect; "and being all as it were officially connected, there are no secrets between us. My two Secretaries are of course acquainted with all that transpires at the Prefecture: these three gentlemen," he continued, glancing towards the spies, "hold secret offices of great trust in connexion with the establishment: and that gentleman," added the Prefect, looking towards Jules Martignac, "as the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, enjoys of course a complete insight into every thing that regards the police. But although, my lord, so many persons are thus acquainted with your special business in Paris and with all that regards the mission of the young English ladies in whom you are interested,—yet the secret itself is as safe as if it were locked up only in your own breast: for the Police Establishment of this great capital sees but with the same eye, hears with but one ear, speaks with but one tongue, and thinks with but one brain. Although consisting of many persons, therefore, it is one great and indivisible whole, and impossible of proving faithless to itself."

"I thank your Excellency for these explanations and assurances," replied Lord Leveson; "and I entertain not the least apprehension for the safety of my secret. Since, then, we are all acquainted with its nature," he continued, glancing with an urbane smile round the board, "we may discourse without reserve thereon."

"Most assuredly," replied the Prefect. "And now, my lord, I have the pleasure to announce to you, from information which I received a few moments before your lordship's arrival, that the grand scheme has reached its crisis—the point at which it will either succeed speedily, or fail signally!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the Marquis, his countenance lighting up with joy: "do you mean really to tell me that Julia Owen is at this moment with your prisoner? This is excellent, especially as I have brought some one with me ——"

"Did I not assure your lordship this morning," interrupted the Prefect, not heeding the last words of the nobleman, "that it would be for to-night?"

"Yes," responded Leveson: "and relying upon the accuracy of your Excellency's information, I have brought a certain person with me whom I wish to become a spectatress of her beloved Jocelyn in the arms of the seductive Julia."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Prefect: "is it possible that you have caused Miss Louisa Stanley to come all the way from England to view her lover's infidelity?—supposing that such infidelity shall really take place."

"And wherefore not kill two birds with one stone?" said the Marquis, with a knowing look. "The opportunity was too good to be lost—and I accordingly availed myself of it."

"'Tis an admirable stroke of policy!" exclaimed Jules Martignac. "Yes—an admirable stroke of policy if your lordship be indeed anxious to break off the contemplated match between Louisa Stanley and this Jocelyn. And, by the bye, since I have heard that this Louisa is so beautiful," continued the vain young Frenchman, with a self-sufficient air, "perhaps your lordship would afford me an opportunity of making myself agreeable to her: for I should really like to have an English mistress."

"I am sorry that I cannot gratify you in this respect," returned the Marquis of Leveson, smiling: "but the fact is that Louisa Stanley is such a perfect angel of beauty I intend to try my own fortune with her first."

"But where is she?" inquired the Prefect.

"On leaving the ambassador's just now," responded the Marquis, "I drove round to the hotel where she is staying with me, and brought her hither in my carriage. She is now in the anteroom——"

"And Mary Owen, who was staying with her at Canterbury?" said the Prefect.

"Is still remaining there," answered Leveson, "in order to take care of Louisa's sick aunt during her absence. Mary is harmless enough while thus employed, and while thus buried in that seclusion. But let us now take a peep into Jocelyn's chamber," added the Marquis, turning his eyes upon the Prefect as he rose from his seat.

"I am at your service, my lord," said that functionary. "Gentlemen, you must excuse us for a few minutes—we cannot take so large a party with us, especially as it appears there is a young lady to accompany us."

The Marquis of Leveson and the Prefect, now quitting the saloon together, passed into the anteroom where Louisa Stanley was waiting. Her form was enveloped in an ample cloak; and a large bonnet, of the Swiss shepherdess-hat style then in vogue, shaded her features. But at the first glance which the Prefect threw upon her, he was indeed struck by the extraordinary beauty of her countenance—although the pallor of grief and the restless expression of acute suspense were upon every feature. Nor less was he enabled to remark that the very drapery which concealed her figure, also developed its matchless symmetry: and beautiful as the Prefect had fancied Julia Owen to be when he saw her on the day she was introduced to the Prefecture, he was now instantaneously struck with the fact that *her* charms were thrown completely into the shade when compared with the transcendent loveliness of Louisa Stanley. The thought therefore traversed the Prefect's brain, that it would really after all be but a little matter of wonder, if the mere image of the pure-minded, innocent, and angelic Louisa should preserve Jocelyn's fidelity immaculate and intact against all the seductive wiles and wanton fascinations of Julia Owen.

"This gentlemen, Miss Stanley," said the Marquis of Leveson, introducing the French official to the young lady, "is his Excellency the Prefect of Police: and he will now explain to you—painful though the subject must be—that the individual whom you have known and unfortunately learnt to love as Jocelyn Loftus, has been incarcerated in the Prefecture on account of his grievous immoralities and wild excesses."

"Oh! heavens, if this be indeed true!" exclaimed Louisa, clasping her hands and bursting into tears: but almost instantly wiping away those crystal drops of bitter, bitter anguish—and with a sudden resumption of an air of maiden dignity—she said, in a tone of forced calmness, "But I am nerved to hear the worst, after all the terrible things that your lordship, with so much disinterested and indeed paternal kindness, has told me!"

While giving utterance to this latter portion of her sentence, with a frank and artless confidence in what she believed to be the good feeling of the Marquis of Leveson, the maiden fixed her blue eyes mournfully upon him: and then she turned those plaintive regards upon the Prefect, with a look that seemed to implore him to state all he knew at once and with as much brevity as possible.

"Young lady," said the Prefect, now also thinking it right to play the paternal, and therefore assuming an air and a tone which seemed to imply that he was performing a very painful task and accomplishing a most disagreeable duty,—"young lady," he repeated, "it is better that you should hear at once the real character of him who has gained your affections, than that you should make so important a discovery when it has become too late to retreat from an unfortunate marriage. The plain truth is, that you have been wooed and your heart has been won by a mere adventurer living under a feigned name, and pursuing a career of reckless extravagance, deep dissipation, and inveterate profligacy."

"O God! have mercy upon me," murmured the unhappy Louisa: and then she compressed her lips forcibly to keep back the scream that rose up from her anguished heart to the very tip of her tongue. "But pray go on, sir—go on," she cried, with nervous trepidation, as she once more wrestled successfully against the harrowing poignancy of her feelings,—or rather fortified herself with the unnatural composure of despair.

"It is too true, then, Miss Stanley," said the Prefect, encouraged by the significant signs and nods which the Marquis gave him, unperceived by the unfortunate girl whom the two wretches were thus basely torturing,—"it is too true that Jocelyn Loftus has conducted himself in such a manner since his arrival in Paris as to scandalize society: and the strong arm of the law has been compelled to interfere to punish him for his excesses. Not that he has committed any positive crime; but his debaucheries, his seductions, and his moral offences have brought dishonour on the name of English-

[JULIA AND MARY OWEN.]

men. Therefore, availing myself of the fact that he was sojourning in France under a false name,—a circumstance rendering him amenable to the law,—I have been compelled in my capacity as guardian of the public morals, to incarcerate him within these walls."

"I dare not disbelieve you, sir—I cannot doubt your word," said Louisa, gazing vacantly around, as if her senses were abandoning her: "but yet it appears to me so impossible—indeed, it looks so like a monstrous dream——"

"Alas! my dear young lady," said Lord Leveson, as he took her hand, with much apparent kindness, "you perceive that it is but too true! Besides which, so high a functionary and so honourable a man as the Prefect of Police would not possibly be guilty of an injustice, on the one hand, towards the person calling himself Jocelyn Loftus—nor, on the other hand, would he so uselessly deceive, or so wantonly afflict a young damsel like you."

"Assuredly not," exclaimed the Prefect. "But I forgive these doubts—this uncertainty—this incredulity, which Miss Stanley displays. They are the evidences of that generous confidence and sublime trust which the loving heart naturally reposes in the object of its affections. But as it is my painful duty to put an end to all your doubts, come hither, young lady—come hither!"

Thus speaking, the Prefect opened a side-door, and led the way into a little cabinet, or office, where a lamp was burning on a table. And upon this same table lay an enormous book with a black cover. It was thicker and larger than the thickest and largest Bible ever used in a Protestant Church: and upon the back of the binding, which was at least a foot wide, were stamped in dingy gold letters these words—*Le Livre Noir;* which, being translated into English, mean, "The Black Book."

Opening this huge volume, and hastily turning over the leaves, which were full of manuscript en

tries in as many different styles of writing as it is possible to conceive, the Prefect paused at a particular page—ran his finger down a certain column,—stopped at a special entry—and said, "Behold, Miss Stanley, the record of the arrest!"

Louisa threw her shuddering looks upon the ominous page, and hastily scanned the particular lines which were pointed out to her. Those lines comprised an entry which if translated into English, would read as follows:—"An Englishman; aged about three-and-twenty; arrested for having his passport made out in the false name of *Jocelyn Loftus:* his real name is known to the Prefect, but for special reasons is not mentioned here. See, however, *Prefect's Private Minute Book*, Folio 2011, second column, 15th line from the top."

"I wish to see no more," murmured the unhappy Louisa, in a dying tone. "I have already seen too much."

"And yet, young lady," said the Marquis,—"for your own complete satisfaction you will consent to behold the crowning proof of your false lover's wickedness and depravity — that crowning proof which I have brought you hither at this late hour to witness! By your Excellency's permission," continued the Marquis, turning towards the Prefect, "we will now repair——"

"I understand," interrupted the Prefect. "Come with me."

Thus speaking, he led the way from the little cabinet, the door of which he carefully locked behind him: then, passing out of the ante-room, he took a lamp in his hand and conducted the Marquis and Louisa up a staircase, at the summit of which there was a massive door. Having noiselessly and cautiously opened this door by means of a key which he had with him, he led the way down a long gloomy passage containing a row of doors, at the *last but one* of which he stopped short.

"Now follow me with the utmost caution and on tiptoe," he said, speaking in a low whisper to the Marquis and Louisa: then, having opened the door with an evident desire to avoid the chance of even a hinge creaking, he deposited the lamp in a niche in the passage, and stole into the chamber.

Louisa Stanley now hung back, and staggered against the wall, as if a faintness was coming over her: for shocked, afflicted, and also indignant as she was at the thought of her lover's profligacy and perfidy, her pure soul nevertheless revolted from the idea of becoming a witness of any proof of his guilt.

"Go on, young lady—go on," whispered the Marquis of Leveson, in a hurried tone: "you must see out this matter to the end, and sustain your courage until the very last!"

Startled into a feverish excitement rather than inspired with any real feeling of curiosity, Louisa Stanley passed into the chamber,—whither however the Marquis did not follow her. But he remained upon the threshold, as if contented to hear the report which might presently be made to him, instead of witnessing with his own eyes the scene itself.

Noiselessly and rapidly did Louisa glide into that chamber: but scarcely had she advanced half a dozen paces, when through the gloom which prevailed she beheld a light shining dimly in as it were from the depths of some recess. At this moment the Prefect took her by the hand, and hurried her forward in the direction where that light seemed to be burning. A few paces more—and Louisa now saw that this light was really in an adjacent chamber, whence it emanated through an aperture in the partition-wall.

Close up to this opening did the Prefect hurry the affrighted maiden—for affrighted she really was at an appearance of so sinister a nature, inasmuch as it really seemed at the moment as if through the vista of gloom her eyes were resting upon a light coming from a vaulted sepulchre. But at the same instant that this thought traversed her imagination, a well-known voice struck upon her ear,—aye, struck upon her brain—vibrating down every chord that led even unto her heart's core: and this voice said in a tone of impassioned remonstrance, "Oh! you will drive me mad—you will drive me mad!"

A shriek rose to the very margin of Louisa's lips—even as a fountain, when disturbed at its depths, bubbles up to the very brim. But the sound was instantaneously stifled and subdued before it burst forth: for an overwhelming sense of utter misery fell crushingly upon the maiden like an awful consternation, as she heard the melodious tones of a female voice replying with the fervour of passion, "O Jocelyn, dear Jocelyn—thou knowest that I love thee!"

Louisa heard no more. The consternation which stifled her scream, struck another blow and deprived her of consciousness—so that she reeled half round and fell heavily upon the floor.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Jocelyn from the inner apartment; "what sound was that?"—and seizing the light from the table, he sprang towards the aperture.

Thrusting the lamp to the entire length of his arm through the opening, its rays fell full upon the countenance of the damsel whom the Prefect was now hurriedly raising from the floor. But, oh! what words can depict the hurricane of amazement and the tornado of agonizing thoughts and wildering ideas which swept all in a moment, like a flight of barbed arrows, through Jocelyn's brain, when the glare of that lamp fell upon the pale, inanimate, but ever lovely countenance of his own Louisa?

A cry of rage—a yell of madness burst furiously from him: but, quick as thought, the Prefect bore the senseless maiden from the room, the door of which was immediately closed. In the frenzied excitement to which he was now a prey, Jocelyn dropped the lamp from his hand; and it was instantaneously extinguished as it fell upon the floor of the adjacent chamber, into which he had thrust it through the aperture.

"Heavens! what is the matter?" exclaimed Julia Owen, startled and affrighted by the suddenness of the scene which thus terminated all in a moment in utter darkness.

"Oh! wretch—profligate—demoness that thou art!" cried Jocelyn, in a voice indicative of a rending anguish: "thou hast ruined me in the eyes of my beloved!"

And as the last word thrilled from his lips with all the wildness of delirium, he fell heavily upon the floor.

"Jocelyn, Jocelyn—speak to me—speak to me!" shrieked Julia Owen, a mortal terror now seizing upon her—for this scene was dreadful in the depth

of that pitchy darkness. "Good heavens! he does not answer me!"—then groping her way to the spot where he had fallen in the alcove whence the bed, it will be remembered, was drawn out, she stooped down and placed her hand upon his face.

His features were motionless, though bathed in those cold damps that send a chill through the warm living flesh that comes in contact with them: and her terror now increasing almost to an agony, she placed her ear to his lips. But she could catch the sound of neither breathing or gasping; and while her brain reeled and she felt as if she were going mad, she placed her hand upon his heart. It throbbed not—no pulsation could she feel,—and with a loud cry that rang forth thrillingly and wild upon the night air, she said, "He is dead—he is dead! My God! 'tis I whose wickedness has killed him. O God! O God!"—and then all consciousness abandoned her.

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE HANGMAN IN HIS GLORY AGAIN.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning; and Mr. Daniel Coffin, having disposed of the beards of all his customers, proceeded to scrape off his own. Seldom was the ludicrous more singularly blended with the ferocious, than in the expression of that man's countenance, as he stood before the glass making those grimaces which usually accompany the progress of the razor over the parts whence the capillary stubble is to be removed. Having shaved himself as closely and neatly as he could, the Hangman ascended to his bed-chamber, where he proceeded to dress himself in his Sunday's apparel: and his toilette being completed, he went down again to his parlour, where he ordered Sally Melmoth to give him a dram of brandy "to keep the cold out of his stomach."

"And where are you off to so smart this morning?" she inquired, as she handed him the liquor.

"Aye—where indeed?" asked her brother Dick.

"Well, you'll be surprised perhaps when I tell you," returned Coffin: then looking hastily round, and observing that Jack the Foundling was not in the room at the moment, he said in a low voice, "I am going to call on our friend Mr. Larry Sampson."

"Larry Sampson!" ejaculated the brother and sister, with looks of amazement. "What on earth can you want with *him?*"

"Well, I suppose you are not afraid of my going to his place," observed the Hangman, with a grim smile of mingled cunning and ferocious satisfaction: "it's no longer the lion's den into which a fellow situated as I was, didn't dare poke his head; and though Larry himself was for a short time a lion in my path, yet he has lost his claws and his teeth now so far as I am concerned. He can't bite or yet scratch: the royal pardon," added Coffin, tapping his pocket significantly, "has made me proof against all dangers in that quarter."

"Of course—we know that," observed Sally Melmoth. "But why go near such a person at all? The very look of him must be odious after all you suffered on his account—playing at hide and seek as you was, and all the latter part of the time not daring to go to your old haunts either at the Folly Bridges, or Polly Scratchem's, or any of the flash cribs, because we got the information that they were all being watched by Larry's men——"

"Well, well—what's the use of recapitulating all these things that we know so thoroughly?" cried the Hangman. "The fact is, Larry got scent some how or another of my being alive and kicking: and, by jingo! now that the thought strikes me," ejaculated the man, his countenance suddenly assuming a look terribly ferocious,—"I do really believe that I can guess who it was that gave Larry a hint of my having escaped the Thames and being still in the land of the living."

"Ah! who do you think?" exclaimed Dick Melmoth.

"Not the Foundling—eh?" said Sally.

"Not at all," answered Coffin. "I know poor Jack is staunch. But who was the first person that I went to after leaving Beechey Manor——"

"Taggarty, to be sure!" cried both brother and sister as it were in the same breath.

"Aye—that's it," said Coffin, with a look gloomily ominous. "Don't you recollect the fellow wouldn't either have me in his house to live a short while—nor would he lend a hand in putting Larry quietly and comfortably out of the way when there was such a capital opportunity. Besides, the very fact that Larry was there that night——"

"Yes—but that was about Jack the Foundling," observed Dick Melmoth.

"Ah! but when once a fellow gets any way in league or connexion with a Bow Street runner," exclaimed the Hangman, dogmatically, "you never can tell what he may be enticed into. At all events, it's very certain," he continued, "that from the moment I went and showed myself at Taggarty's, all the flash cribs and boozing-kens were closely watched by Larry's spies."

"To be sure! The information was deuced soon passed round to all the knowing ones," observed Dick Melmoth: "and so we lost no time in putting you up to what was going on. Why, there was Joe Parkes's on Saffron Hill—Sharp Mawley's over in the Mint—Meg Blowen's in the Almonry—Polly Scratchem's down in Whitechapel—and Beucull's crib in Jacob's Island,—they were all close watched day and night, without ceasing——"

"And devilish lucky it was, then, that I hadn't gone to either," said Daniel Coffin, "as was my original intention. But by going and staying first with Old Jeremy Humpage in Whitechapel—then with the Swag Chovey Bloak in St. George's Fields—I managed to escape all Mr. Sampson's devices till the very day that Dysart was to be hung and I was wanted again at the Old Bailey. Come—give me another glass of lush," he exclaimed with a chuckle that sounded like the subdued growl of a hyæna: "for after all, I like talking of these things when they are all past and gone and the danger's over."

"And so you really do suspect Taggarty?" said Sally Melmoth, as she refilled the Hangman's glass.

"Well, I don't see how the devil I can help suspecting him," returned Coffin. "The idea flashed to my mind all in a moment: but it at once took a deep root there—and now let me tell

you that if I was to think over it a hundred years, I couldn't be more convinced than I am at this instant that it *was* Taggarty who must have peached."

"But what are you going to Larry Sampson's for this morning?" asked his mistress.

"Why, there's five or six fellows to be tucked up down in the country," answered the Hangman, with a sinister leer; "and I was going to ask Larry just to drop a note to the sheriffs of those counties and recommend me as a gentleman which does his business in a neat, agreeable, and workmanlike manner in the hanging line:"—and he gave another low chuckling laugh the mirth of which was as pleasant as that of a hyæna.

"But you don't want such country custom, do you?" asked Sally, in surprise.

"No such thing," returned Coffin: "but what I *do* want is an excuse to have a chat with Larry Sampson. I dare say he'll let bygones be bygones and talk pleasant enough when he sees that I am civil on my side. Larry isn't a fellow to bear grudges: but I am though—desperately—infernally!" he added with terrible emphasis.

"And what do you want to talk to him about?" asked Sally, now questioning the Hangman with more timidity than at first—for his temper appeared to be lowering. "But perhaps you hope to be able to worm out some secrets from Larry Sampson?"

"A little in that way," responded the Hangman, with a grim smile, which reassured his mistress and her brother as to the condescending and communicative humour he was in. "What I chiefly want to see is whether Larry will speak to me about Jack the Foundling at all. For don't you see that it was so odd he should get all that information from Taggarty—drop so many hints about the lad's probably being the son of well-to-do-parents—and then suddenly take no more notice of the matter than if he had never made any such inquiries at all? So I mean to try and draw Master Larry out in that respect."

"And how shall you do it?" inquired Dick Melmoth.

"Don't you see, I've got my excuse all ready cut and dried for Larry," continued the Hangman: "and I shall tell him that the reason I want to get these country execution jobs is to have an opportunity of letting the Foundling try his hand at tucking the chaps up—as I shall say that I mean to make a Jack Ketch of him. So now don't you see that if there is any truth at all in the idea of the Foundling belonging to a respectable family, Larry will deuced soon be horrified at the idea of the young fellow taking to the gallows-functions: and he'll tell me to wait a while or think better of it, or something of that sort—and if he does this, then we shall really know that he didn't make all those inquiries about the lad Jack for nothing at all."

"Well really, Daniel," said his mistress, coaxingly, "I always knew you was a wide-awake fellow—but I didn't give you credit for so much cunning as all this."

"Nor I," observed Dick Melmoth: "and I do believe you'll succeed in getting something out of Larry after all."

"And if you do find that Jack is the son of respectable parents," observed Sal, "you'll be able to make a pretty penny of the business—eh?"

"Well, we shall see?"—and the Hangman was about to sally forth, when suddenly recollecting something, he felt the pockets of his coat, and then exclaimed, "By Satan! I was going without my tools—and that's a thing I don't often do, seeing that they very frequently come into use at a moment when it's least expected that they'll be wanted at all."

Dick Melmoth hastened to open a cupboard, whence he took forth a bunch of skeleton keys, which he wrapped up in paper so as to prevent them from jingling. He next produced from the same place a small "jemmy," or crowbar, about a foot and a half long, and about the thickness of the thumb—but of the strongest wrought iron, and admirably shaped for burglarious purposes. He then drew forth a small tin box an inch and a half in diameter, and filled with wax, which was used to take the impression of a key should such process be required for ulterior purposes. Lastly, Dick Melmoth produced a couple of knitting-needles, pointed in a particular manner, and used for cutting panes of glass in the same way as a glazier's diamond.

All the articles just detailed did Mr. Daniel Coffin secure about his person; and as he wore a sort of shooting-coat, the crowbar lay easily enough lengthwise at the bottom of one of his capacious pockets. But it must not be supposed that the Hangman had any special purpose now in view in thus arming himself with the implements of his secret profession. The fact was that he seldom if ever stirred abroad without those little articles which might at any moment come unexpectedly handy: and as habit is second nature, he positively would not have felt comfortable had he omitted his usual practice in this respect.

Sallying forth accordingly, with the royal pardon in one of his pockets and the implements of burglary distributed about in all the others, Mr. Daniel Coffin took his way to Long Acre. On knocking at the door of Larry Sampson's house, his summons was answered by Dame Margery, the officer's housekeeper, to whom the person of the Hangman was not known. Not that she was however at all prepossessed in his favour: for, as the reader is already aware, he had a most hang-dog look about him, even when attired in his best apparel.

"Is Mr. Sampson at home?" he asked.

"No, he is not," responded Dame Margery, eyeing him askance, and keeping the door half closed.

"But I want to see him very particularly," said the Hangman. "Indeed, it's about professional business," he added, with a significant look.

"Then who are you?" inquired the woman.

"Lord bless you!" returned the Hangman: "my functions are up there in the Old Bailey:"—and as he spoke, with a still deeper significancy of look, he jerked his thumb over his left shoulder in the direction of the locality which he had named.

Now it instantaneously struck Dame Margery that the fellow must be a turnkey from Newgate; and, with this belief, she had no longer any hesitation in admitting him into the house. She accordingly requested him to walk in and wait a short time,—observing that it was more than probable that Mr. Sampson would not be long before he returned. Daniel Coffin at once accepted the invitation, and was forthwith conducted into the breakfast-parlour, where Dame Margery left him. But after waiting upwards of three quarters of an hour, the Hangman got tired of re-

maining there doing nothing; and he thought that he might as well repair to the nearest public-house and regale himself until Mr. Sampson should return. He accordingly issued forth from the parlour with the view of telling the housekeeper whither he was going, and requesting that a message might be sent to inform him when her master came back: but though he coughed, hemm'd, and stamped with his foot, in order to attract the attention of Dame Margery, no response was given to his summons. Fancying she might be up-stairs, he coolly and quietly ascended to the storey above; for Mr. Daniel Coffin was not accustomed to be over nice or delicate in the observance of ceremony and the punctilios of etiquette.

"Hem! hah!—I say, now then!—will nobody answer?" he exclaimed, on reaching the landing of the first floor: but all was silent—for the very simple reason that Dame Margery was down in the kitchen attending to her culinary duties, and being rather deaf, she heard not the Hangman's voice.

As for the servant-of-all-work, she had gone out upon an errand: and thus did it happen that no attention was paid to Mr. Coffin.

"Well, I suppose the place is deserted," he muttered to himself, in that low growling tone which was peculiar to him when vexed or annoyed: and opening the door that was nearest, he looked in and perceived that it was a handsomely furnished drawing-room. "Upon my word! Mr. Sampson is quite a gentleman. Ah! he must have made a good thing of his business—no doubt of it!" added the Hangman, as he glanced around the well-appointed apartment: then stepping forth upon the landing again, he closed the door behind him. "I wonder what *this* room is," he now said, as he grasped the handle of another door; but it was locked.

Obedient to some strange and scarcely accountable impulse, Daniel Coffin stooped down to peep through the keyhole: but he found it impervious to his view, being closed on the inner side;—and he muttered to himself, "Well, this is a peculiar lock, made on purpose to prevent anybody from looking through it."

Such a circumstance was quite enough to arouse the curiosity of the Hangman; and without any more ado he at once took forth his skeleton keys, and thrust one of them into the lock, in which it turned without difficulty. The door was opened accordingly; and Coffin entered the apartment.

And now it would be difficult to describe this individual's amazement at the first glance which he cast around the room: for the walls were studded with innumerable pegs, to which hung an infinite assortment of male and female dresses. These were evidently intended and used as disguises;—and as the Hangman contemplated this singular wardrobe with a closer scrutiny, he observed that it contained the specimen of almost every costume then existing in England. There was even the Court dress, as well as the soldier's uniform: the fashionable suit of a West End dandy was side-by-side with the lace-bedizened livery of a domestic servant. The complete costume of a sportsman was suspended next to the ragged garb of a beggar: the dress of a stone-mason was in contrast with that of a sweep. The characteristic apparel of a parish beadle hung next to the mud-besmeared garb of a peasant;—and the rough dress of a sailor was close to the modest uniform of a postman. In fine, the dresses of all grades and classes, as well as of both sexes, were comprised in this perfect museum of costume:—and it was quite clear that the individual possessing such an extraordinary collection, could at any moment transform himself into the semblance of a peer or a peasant—a parson or a postman—a sportsman or a soldier— a tailor or a tinker—a gentleman or a gipsy—a mariner or a pickpocket—a rollicking highwayman or a mean petty thief—a substantial farmer or a needy mendicant—a costermonger or a ballad singer—a fortune-teller or a match-woman—a fish-fag or a gipsy,—or in fine, any member of any grade, class, or section of society.

But these transformations were not to be made only by means of the various dresses suspended around: other auxiliaries and accessories were likewise at hand in this apartment. Thus, upon a long shelf stood a row of barber's blocks, each surmounted with a wig: and as a matter of course these wigs were of different colours, shapes, and qualities, affording specimens of all the varieties of the peruke species. Then, on another shelf there were false whiskers, mustachios, and beards,—yes, and even false eyebrows: and on a third shelf were pots of rouge, hair-powder, paints, colours, and dyes of all shades, degrees, and descriptions.

There was one more feature of interest in this room which came in for a due share of the Hangman's attention: and this was an enormous book, as large as a church-bible, and the contents of which were divided into three specific departments. The first was a list of all the bad characters, male and female, infesting the metropolis: and against every name was affixed the date of its entry in that book, thereby showing how long each individual in the category had been under the surveillance of Mr. Lawrence Sampson. The second compartment contained a list of all the flash cribs, boozing-kens, fence-shops, low lodging houses, and places of vile resort in which the metropolis abounded; and so complete was the information given by this list, that to every den thus specified was added the name of the person keeping it, followed by memoranda of what sort of characters frequented it, the sums paid for accommodation or refreshment, and all other particulars calculated to be of service to a Bow Street officer. The third compartment of this extraordinary book consisted of a journal, or diary, in which Mr. Lawrence Sampson was wont to enter minutes of his proceedings, remarkable incidents, gleanings and experiences, personal adventures, or any other matters worth recording in connexion with his avocations.

The reader will naturally suppose that on discovering this book of mysteries, the curiosity of the Hangman was instantaneously excited to ascertain first of all whether his own name figured in the category of bad characters: and on turning to the proper page and column, according to the alphabetical arrangement of the entries, he not only found the name of Daniel Coffin duly chronicled, but also the startling fact, as proved by the date annexed, that Mr. Lawrence Sampson had been aware of his real character for some years past.

As a matter of course all the low cribs and

boozing-kens, as well as all other vile haunts and infamous receptacles throughout the metropolis were chronicled in the second compartment. But as the reader may perhaps be curious to learn the manner in which Mr. Sampson kept his ledger of demoralization, debauchery, poverty, mendicity, and crime, we will quote a few miscellaneous extracts from this division of the great book:—

"*Rose and Crown*, Church Lane, St. Giles's. Weekly club held here; chiefly of street hawkers, costermongers, labourers, chimney-sweepers, and beggars: the women frequenting this place are nearly all Irish. A young fighting fellow in a flannel jacket (name forgotten) generally presides; always has a plate before him containing the subscription money to pay for the gin, beer, and tobacco. Sometimes the company amuse themselves by dancing reels; or else a fellow named Garry, formerly in the 18th Hussars, gives an exhibition of the shillelah dance. The landlord's name is——.

"*Sidney Smith*, Dock Street, Whitechapel. Evening concerts; dreadful low class of women, always on the look out for sailors flush of cash. Dancing as well as music: each person who dances pays twopence for the benefit of the musician.

"*The Black Bull*, Windmill Street, Haymarket. Music and dancing at this place; singing to a piano accompaniment. Most of the men frequenting this house are cross-coves, thimble-men, or swell-mobsmen: the females are women of the town. A great many juveniles visit this house, young thieves with their girls. The waiter is a comic fellow, sings comic songs, is on good terms with every body, and sips of every body's brandy-and-water with the most condescending friendship: always calling out for '*ladies and gentlemen to give their orders.*' The songs sung at this place are not indecent; mostly humourous. One of the most favourite flash songs begins in this way:—

A cross-cove is in the street for me,
And I a poor girl of a low degree;
If I was as rich as I am poor,
Ye never should go on the cross no more.
CHORUS.
He's a right down chap, a chickle leary chap, and a loving cove!

"*Penny Theatre*, Shorts' Gardens. Frequented by boys, girls, and all kinds of juvenile thieves and prostitutes: always dreadful bad language before the curtain draws up. The last night I was there saw a drunken combat as an interlude between *George Barnwell* and a scene from the *Beggar's Opera*. Performers about ten in number; most of them go about attending fairs and shows in the season.

"*Red House* in the Mint: two people sleep in each bed, threepence a night. The grossest scenes of immorality constantly occurring in this place.

"*The Mogul*, Drury Lane. Large room holding several hundred persons: concerts and performances every night: frequented by all kinds of people; great numbers of dissolute livery servants meet here; also young apprentices and their girls. The landlord keeps it as respectable as he possibly can.

"*Thompson's Lodging Houses*, Castle Street, Long Acre. Nos. 23, 24, 25. Make up between 60 and 70 beds between them. Thompson has similar houses over in Mint Street; most detestable places, frequented by the worst of characters—every feeling of decency totally lost sight of, persons of both sexes and all ages sleeping promiscuously: grown up brothers and sisters thus sleep together.

"*Southgate's Lodging Houses* are in Mitre Court, St. John's Street; New Court, Cow Cross, Smithfield; Turnmill Street, Clerkenwell; and on Saffron Hill; altogether making up 300 beds every night.

"*Grout's Lodging Houses* in St. Giles's are filled with low truckle beds, supplied with a straw mattress, two coarse sheets, and an old rug. Here the poor but honest labouring man is in nightly company with the professional thief; while perhaps his wife and grown up daughters are compelled to herd with the vilest prostitutes. As a matter of course the people frequenting these lodging-houses consist of various descriptions; and each description may again be subdivided into various classes. It is a most truthful remark which I have heard, that '*the microscope shows the subdivision of atoms, and a minute inquiry into various classes subdivides society into unimaginei grades.*'

"No. —, Wentworth Street, Whitechapel, is a kinchinken. The fellow who keeps it is called the *kidman*: he boards and lodges young boys, training them up to be thieves; always has at least twenty boys in his establishment: the young ones are instructed by the elder, and are never allowed to go out before they are quite perfect."*

These and numerous other entries, especially those regarding the Hangman's favourite haunts, met his view; nor did he fail to observe that Taggarty's shop on Mutton Hill was mentioned in the category as a place where cheeses, flitches of bacon, bladders of lard, and all kinds of chandlery were purchased "without any questions being asked." But no words can describe the amazement, the consternation, and even the stupefaction which seized upon Daniel Coffin, when on searching for the entry relative to Beneuli's *Dark Crib* in Jacob's Island, he found the following memorandum appended:—"*See my journal, Wednesday, Sept.* 19, 1814, *for the account of how I visited this place disguised as a knife-grinder, and how I was thrown into the black ditch, escaping with my life in a manner truly miraculous.*"

Yes—stupified indeed was the Hangman as these words met his view. All his thoughts were suddenly congealed—all his ideas were frozen in a moment! But when he somewhat recovered himself, and his reflections once more flowed on in their proper channel, mystery after mystery was cleared up relative to past incidents, and truth after truth revealed itself to his comprehension. Yes—for when he glanced around and beheld all those varied and admirably contrived disguises, he was no longer at a loss to understand how the whole plot relative to the burglary at Mrs. Owen's had been discovered by Larry Sampson: for that the knife-grinder and the officer were identical, was a fact now placed beyond all possibility of doubt: and what, then, was more probable but that the country bumpkin in the tap-room of the *King's Arms* at Richmond, was also the ubiquitous and protean Lawrence Sampson?

But while he was still pursuing his hurried and startling reflections in this manner, Daniel Coffin hastened to turn to the third compartment of the great book: and *there*, sure enough, he discovered a detailed account of all the officer's proceedings while engaged in prosecuting his inquiries and researches into the outrage offered to the Prince Regent and the Marquis of Leveson, as detailed in earlier chapters of our narrative. A farther investigation into Mr. Sampson's diary showed Daniel Coffin that Taggarty had *not* betrayed him to the officer, but that the seeming beggar-woman who had so importunately solicited alms of him as he issued from Taggarty's house on the night in question, was in reality Lawrence Sampson. Other facts did the Hangman also ascertain concerning matters that either interested himself or those persons with whom he was connected: but we shall not pause to enter into minuter details

* Some of this information is actually chronicled upon the authority of entries and memoranda in a police-book to which we have been allowed access.

now. Suffice it to say, that without for an instant recollecting the possibility—or indeed the probability of being interrupted while prying into the mysteries of the bulky volume, he continued to study its contents with the deepest attention; and the more profoundly he examined into it, the more was he astonished and bewildered at the extraordinary mass of information which Lawrence Sampson had acquired relative to all the bad characters and flash houses in London. Nor less was the Hangman astounded at the remarkable perseverance, the unflinching dauntlessness, the exquisite skill, and the reckless indifference to danger, which characterised the Bow Street officer, and which qualities were made apparent enough by the various adventures, enterprises, and proceedings chronicled in the diary.

We must, however, leave Daniel Coffin for a few minutes to peruse the entries chiefly regarding himself or his companions in iniquity, while we proceed to furnish our readers with a few specimens of those parts of Mr. Sampson's journal which may be termed his *comments* or *experiences*. And therefore, without farther preface, we quote the following extracts:—

"Parliament being over, most of the beggars are going out of town to make the round of the country-seats of the nobility and gentry. A great many of them are dressed like old soldiers or sailors; and they are all well provided with lists of those houses and estates where military or naval officers dwell. Be it observed that before the beggars go out into the country upon these expeditions, they meet at certain cadgers'-haunts, low lodging-houses, or boozing-kens in London, and exchange information as to what country-seats are *good* to call at. Because as the same parties cannot call twice at the same place *during the season*, they lose nothing by giving each other such information. In fact, it is a constant practice with beggars to compare notes in this manner. When once out in the country in Autumn, they remain out while the *hare-skin time* is on; because while buying and selling hare-skins, they are able to pass away a great quantity of bad money.

"Women hire infants for fourpence or sixpence a day each, and make at least five shillings a day by carrying them about—particularly if a woman hires two children at the same time and represents them as twins.

"There are some beggars who know every *good* house in the country. Some who *go the highfly*, or play the part of broken-down gentlemen, manage to make ten or fifteen pounds a week. Sometimes they take drawings with them, which they present to the ladies whom they see at parlour-windows, or walking in gardens, or on lawns, at country-seats, leaving the reward to their generosity. Sometimes they bribe gentlemen's servants to take in their begging letters, and just throw in any little word of commiseration that may assist their case. Just the opposite of these are the beggars that *go upon the shallow*—that is, half-naked. They obtain from compassionate persons quantities of left-off clothes, by which they make as much sometimes as twelve or fifteen shillings per day. This is one of the most lucrative systems of beggary; but it of course succeeds best in the cold weather, when the beggars manage to shiver and shake like aspens, and thus attract a vast amount of sympathy. The system of hawking is also excellent: many small shopkeepers do not make in a day so much as some of these itinerant venders. Take for instance a pair of knit cotton braces: the hawker buys them at fourpence, and sells them at one shilling and twopence—or at all events a shilling. He puts on the extra halfpence expecting to be beaten down.*

"Beggars not only provide themselves with lists of the residences of benevolent people in town and country, but also have lists of all charitable Societies and Institutions, to which they constantly apply in the winter; such as for coals, potatoes, &c., which they always sell as soon as obtained, for half their value. Women get baby-linen, tickets of admission to lying-in-hospitals, &c., all of which they immediately sell for what they can get.

"Of an evening in London, the beggars meet at their favourite haunts, where they eat and drink of the best. At night they generally stay in doors and get drunk; but a few of them dress themselves out in decent style and go to the cheap concerts or to low gaming-houses. In Petticoat Lane, Whitechapel, there are several low gaming-houses, kept by Jews; and as it is chiefly here that the beggars sell the clothes which they obtain when out *on the shallow*, so it is hither they come to lose their ill-got money again at the gaming-table. Nearly all the Jews in Petticoat Lane are receivers of stolen goods, or fences; one or two of them keep fence-shops up at the West-End as branch establishments, and even sometimes send large quantities of stolen property abroad. There are a great many publicans who buy stolen property, and then sell it again at a profit to the Jew-fences. Some of these Jews go into the country once or twice a year, travel from town to town, and sell to country-dealers the plunder of the metropolis. There are many Christian jewellers and silversmiths who buy property *direct* from thieves; and it is common enough with refiners, who never ask any questions at all. The wealthiest Jew-fences have agents, and are themselves but seldom seen in the transactions.

"Another dangerous class of persons who profit by the crimes which they do not *directly* commit themselves, are the *putters-up* of burglaries; and these are very often marine-store dealers, or else flashy-looking fellows frequenting public-houses. This latter class is specially dangerous; they get hold of servant girls who come to fetch the beer, pretend to court them, worm out of them the secrets of the houses to which they belong, and then give the requisite information to the cracksmen or burglars. Livery-servants are frequently *putters-up* of burglaries. The cracksman or burglar generally dresses shabby, like a distressed tradesman: they remain all day in low public-houses or boozing-kens, drinking or playing at skittles.

"At the bottom of Red Lion Street, Clerkenwell, is Capel Court; and there lives a blacksmith who makes housebreakers' implements. Cracksmen go to him and give their orders: he tells them when the implements will be ready, and appoints to meet them at some boozing-ken, perhaps quite in another part of London. The sum agreed upon is paid at this interview; and the blacksmith hands over a brown paper parcel, containing all the implements, stating that the packet has just come up from the country."*

Having thus afforded our readers a specimen of Mr. Larry Sampson's diary, we will now return to the Hangman, whom we left busily engaged in consulting those entries and statements which specially regarded himself and the members of the gang to which he belonged.

He was still deep in his somewhat unpleasant though interesting studies, when the thought suddenly floated to his mind that he was incurring a great risk of detection by prolonging his intrusion in the privacy of the officer's *sanctum*. He there-

* India-rubber braces cost 12s. a dozen; and the hawker sells them at 2s. a-piece. Steel pens can be bought as low as 4d. a gross—that is, twelve dozen; and the hawker can sell three or four pens for a penny.

* The preceding information is given upon the authority of the police-book referred to in the annotation at page 270; and relative to Petticoat Lane we were particularly struck by the following remarks:—"The Jews here can raise money to purchase any amount of property. There is one Jew, L—— L——, who has bought as much as 1200*l.* worth of stolen property at one time. If the royal crown and all the jewels were stolen from the Tower and taken down to Petticoat Lane, the money would be raised in less than a couple of hours to buy them all. The great merchants could not raise a foreign loan quicker upon Change."

fore resolved to beat a precipitate retreat: and closing the book, he stole forth from the room—shut the door behind him—re-locked it by means of the skeleton-key which had ere now opened it—and then crept stealthily down-stairs into the breakfast-parlour.

Fortunate indeed was it that he took this step just at the moment: for scarcely had he seated himself in the parlour, when Dame Margery made her appearance.

"Mr. Sampson," she said, "has this moment sent up from Bow Street, to inform me that he shall not be home to dinner, and indeed that I must not expect to see him before the evening, as some pressing business has transpired to demand his immediate attention elsewhere."

"Oh! very well, ma'am," said Daniel Coffin, inwardly rejoicing to think that he had not been surprised by the old dame up in her master's private room. "Then I needn't wait any longer—and so I'll call another day."

"Who shall I say has been?" inquired the housekeeper.

The Hangman hesitated a moment whether he should give his name: but immediately recollecting that the woman need only describe his personal appearance in order to make her master understand who the visitor was, he said boldly, "Mr. Dan'el Coffin of Fleet Lane."

"Ah!" she ejaculated, her looks filling with evident disgust and horror as the mention of that name, striking upon her ear like a pestilence upon the entire frame, revealed to her the fact that she stood in the presence of the public executioner. "Good morning—good morning," she hurriedly observed, as she flew to open the front door with an undisguised longing for the departure of so unwelcome a visitant.

"Good morning, ma'am," said Coffin, not choosing to take any notice of her altered manner: and he issued from the house.

CHAPTER LXXII.

THE CONSULTATION.

It was between eight and nine o'clock in the evening of the same day, that the Hangman knocked at the door of Bencull's dark crib in Mill Street, Jacob's Island. He was no longer apparelled in his Sunday's best—having put off his gala-garb on his return home from Larry Sampson's house; and he was now attired in his usual coarse and ruffian-looking style.

"Who's there?" demanded the well-known voice of Bencull from within.

"Mr. Dan'el Coffin," was the answer, accompanied by a peculiar whistle.

"All right!" said Bencull: and the next moment the door was opened.

"Anybody here yet?" demanded the Hangman, as he entered the passage of that ominous-looking house.

"No—nobody yet," replied Bencull, as he closed and bolted the street door.

"So much the better," observed Coffin: "because I want to speak to you very particular indeed."

The two men proceeded into the back room which has been described in a previous chapter: liquor and pipes were produced;—and when the glasses were filled and the blue wreaths of the tobacco-smoke were curling upward, Bencull said, "Now, old fellow, what is it?"

"Well, my worthy friend," responded the Hangman, looking moodily solemn and savagely serious as he spoke,—"I've made a discovery to-day that regards me—you—everybody pretty nearly that we know—and thousands of folk besides."

"What the devil do you mean, Dan'el?" exclaimed the landlord of the dark crib, taking his pipe from his mouth and gazing with mingled astonishment and alarm upon his companion.

"Why, I mean that there's a man in existence," replied Coffin, "who for years past has been spreading out a great web until he has covered the whole of London with the invisible meshes. And in the middle of this web does he sit like a sharp cunning spider; while hundreds of flies are getting entangled in it without knowing it, as one may say—so that this great spider has got nothing to do but to come forth at any moment and seize upon any one of the flies that it fancies for its own precious picking. Or else maybe it will bide its time and pounce upon half-a-dozen or a dozen at a time, and of course make a terrible smash of them all."

"I say, Dan'el, I can patter flash as well as any cross-cove going," observed Bencull: "but, by jingo, if I can understand a single word of all this gibberish that you're been jabbering! Come now, let's have a bit of English: 'cos why, all that there is Greek to me."

"I can deuced soon explain myself," rejoined the Hangman. "Only fancy that Larry Sampson is this precious great spider, and that all the cross-coves, macers, magsmen, prigs, and cracksmen in London are the flies. *Now* do you understand me?"

"I begin to do so," answered Bencull; "but only just as a feller has a wacant idea of what he's about just when he's getting sober after a deuced good booze."

"Then listen," said the Hangman. "Larry Sampson has got a thundering big book, divided into three parts. In the first part he puts down the names of all people that the law looks with a suspicious eye upon; and I need hardly tell you that *your* name and *mine* ain't omitted. In the second division of the book, there's a list of all the flash cribs, fence-shops, and travellers' houses* in London; and *again* I need hardly say that *your* establishment isn't forgotten. But what's more, every soul frequenting it is also put down in Larry's book: so there's me to begin with—then Jeremy Humpage—next the Swag Chovey Bloak—then Bob the Durrynacker—the Mushroom Faker—the Highflyer of Fakements—the Buttoner—Nell Gibson—and in fact all the select company that honour Mr. Bencull's house with their presence."

"Well, I'm not over and above surprised to hear this," observed the landlord of the dark crib. "Of course, Larry Sampson knows all these things: his spies are everywhere——"

"Wait a moment, old fellow," exclaimed Coffin, "and just hear what the third part of this great book says. It's a sort of narrative or journal of all Larry's proceedings, adventures, and enter-

* The low lodging houses are thus called.

prises; and what will you think when I tell you that that knife-grinding fellow which we chucked over into the ditch, was never drowned at all, but is alive and kicking at this moment!"

"No—by jingo! is this true?" cried Bencull, turning deadly pale. "Why, 'tis enough to hang us all!"—and he put his hand to his throat, as if he already experienced the unpleasant sensation produced by the contact of a halter.

"*I* can't be hanged for it, at all events," exclaimed Daniel Coffin, "seeing that I've got the royal pardon safe and sound in my pocket. But you haven't heard quite all yet: for if you are astonished at what I've already told you, I don't know how you'll feel when I tell you that the knife-grinder and Larry Sampson were one and the same person!"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Bencull, half starting from his chair, and chucking down his pipe so abruptly upon the table that it broke into a dozen pieces. "You are either mad or drunk, Dan'el: which the devil is it?"

"Neither, you fool," answered the Hangman, with one of his characteristic growls. "What I tell you is true: and more than that, I have read in the great book sufficient to show me that Larry Sampson is acquainted with the secrets of nearly the whole lot of cross-coves in London."

"But why doesn't he take us up by hundreds, and have us hung by twenties at a time?" asked Bencull, gathering courage from the reflection which prompted the query.

"Why, don't you see," exclaimed Coffin, impatiently, "that there's a wide deal of difference between knowing all these kind of things, and being able to get together the necessary evidence to convict a chap at the Old Bailey! But you *do* see that Larry is constantly nabbing fellows under extraordinary circumstances. Look how he ferrets them out—traces their whole proceedings—follows

them as one may say step by step, from the moment they plan a crime till the instant it is completed—brings the whole mass of evidence to burst like a storm around them—and sends them to the scaffold at last! Don't you see this constantly being done, I say?—and isn't it often a matter of wonder how Larry *does* contrive to bring things home to people? Well then, now it ceases to be a matter of wonder, after all that I have seen and learnt to-day."

The Hangman then proceeded to inform his friend Bencull how he had penetrated into Larry Sampson's private apartment, and how he had beheld there all the costumes and other accessories for an infinite variety of complete disguises. Bencull was as much amazed and as thoroughly petrified with wonder at hearing this recital, as Coffin himself had been when first entering that mysterious apartment at Sampson's house. Indeed, several minutes elapsed ere Bencull could recover in the slightest degree from that stupor into which he was thus plunged.

"Well, there is one thing I can't understand," he said at length, when he had lighted another pipe and taken a few whiffs. "How was it that within an hour after Larry Sampson escaped from the ditch behind this house, he did not have you and me and all the others taken up and lodged in Newgate at once?"

"Oh! I can understand his reason full well," returned the Hangman. "You was one of the party that did that job with the Prince and Marquis of Leveson at Beechy Manor—"

"Well, what of that?" exclaimed Bencull.

"Only that Larry Sampson, as it appears by his book, was employed to sift that affair to the bottom," continued Daniel Coffin; "and the better to follow out his researches, he took the disguise of a knife-grinder—first going down to Richmond to make inquiries there, and then coming down here. Now, if he had handed us all over to justice, he would have had to say why he came to the dark crib, so as to make out his tale;—and that would have been to tell on what special service he was engaged at the time, and consequently to proclaim to the whole world what had happened to the Prince and the Marquis of Leveson on a certain memorable night. But as neither the Prince nor the Marquis wanted it known at all,—but on the contrary, had certain reasons of their own for wishing it to be kept deuced quiet,—Larry Sampson thought it best to hold his peace about his adventure down here."

"Well, all this may be likely enough," said Bencull: "but still it's quite clear that Larry knows a great deal more than is convenient. And now I recollect, the night when he was down here disguised as a knife-grinder, he went up-stairs and saw old Jeremy Humpage——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Hangman: "never mind anything about the details of what happened on that particular night. What we have chiefly to think about at present, is whether we are to take any step to insure our safety for the future."

"In what way?" asked Bencull, with that kind of ominously significant look which showed that he had caught an inkling of the idea then uppermost in the Hangman's mind. "Come, speak out, Dan'el: you and me are old pals, and can trust each other."

"Then my mind is made up as to Larry Sampson," answered Coffin. "It's quite clear that no business is to be done in future with any degree of safety, as long as Larry is alive. He has got a halter round *your* neck—and round the necks of all our pals and confederates—and he won't be long before he gets one round *my* neck again also. And when it is considered that he can pull these halters tight at any moment he chooses, by Satan! to make away with such a fellow would be conferring a blessing on the whole fraternity."

"You and me, Dan'el," observed Bencull, jerking his pipe towards the back of the house, "have shoved out more than one stiff'un into the black ditch; and therefore I don't see why we should hesitate in making a croaker of Mr. Larry Sampson."

"To be sure not—and it shall be done!" cried the Hangman. "But we must also take measures to get possession of his book at the same time that we do his business for him: or else, if that great volume fell into the hands of another officer, it would soon put him into the right way of becoming as knowing—and consequently as dangerous as Larry Sampson himself."

"Well, have you got any scheme in your head?" demanded Bencull.

"Larry Sampson must be enticed down here," said the Hangman, "by some means or another; and while you and two or three of our most trustworthy pals are doing his business for him, I will call at his house in Long Acre on some pretence and get possession of the great book,"

"Well and good," said Bencull. "But how the deuce do you hope to entice Larry to trust himself again in the dark crib?"

"Cunning as he is, let us see if we can't be more cunning still. What think you of planting some woman upon him to make him believe that through revenge she wants to betray a scheme in which her flash man is engaged? This looks so devilish nat'ral, if we could only get a blowen of the right sort to carry it out."

"What say you to Nell Gibson?" demanded Bencull. "She's the most artfullest gal which I ever happened to be acquainted with—besides which, she's got such a way of looking so precious innocent and sincere when she's really plotting the deepest mischief."

"Yes—we'll make use of Nell Gibson in this matter. But are you quite sure that Nell is the most trustworthy young woman that we could employ in the matter? You know her better than I do."

"Why, my maxim always is never to trust any woman farther than you can see her," replied Bencull: "and therefore it's my advice that while setting Nell Gibson to work against Larry Sampson, we should also set somebody to watch Nell Gibson."

"A very capital plan of your's, old fellow," observed the Hangman. "And now, taking it for granted that Nell Gibson will embark in this business, who shall we plant in turn upon her?"

"Well, of all covies that ever come to this house," answered Bencull, after a few moments' reflection, "that Buttoner, or thimble-rig feller, is the downiest. Besides which, he's been raither sweet upon Nell Gibson for some time past: but Nell won't have nothing to say to him because he's down in his luck, and hasn't done over well lately. If we was only to rig him out with new toggery from head to foot—give

him a few cooters to flash about with—and set him up in Swell Street, Nell would precious soon take up with him, 'cos he's not a bad-looking chap by no means."

"Well, I don't mind venturing fifteen or twenty guineas for this part of the business," observed the Hangman; "and you can therefore make it all right with the Buttoner."

"Agreed," said Bencull.

The Hangman accordingly produced his pocket-book and drew forth bank notes to the amount of twenty pounds, which he handed to his accomplice: then rising from his seat, he said, "I will go and see Nell Gibson at once. She lives at Mother Young's—don't she?"

"Yes—where that old witch Mother Franklin is," replied Bencull.

"To be sure,—I know all about it. I've been there often enough before. So I'll just go and make it all right with Nell, and will then come back to take another glass with you. Perhaps I shall bring her with me."

Daniel Coffin then quitted the dark crib.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

NELL GIBSON.

TURNING abruptly out of Mill Street into the narrow passage that went shelving down towards the black ditch, the Hangman hastily traversed the ricketty old wooden bridge—pausing only for an instant to cast a look down on that stagnant water, the surface of which seemed like black marble as the feeble moonlight played upon it. Cutting straight through the fearful rookery constituting Jacob's Island, he passed over another bridge on the farther side, and at once plunged into the maze of vile, narrow, dark, and filthy streets in the immediate vicinage.

In a few minutes Daniel Coffin reached a street somewhat wider and to all appearances more respectable than the rest; and presently he paused at a house whose shutters, blinds, and door were all green. A subdued light shone forth from every window; and the sounds of several female voices emanated from the front room on the ground-floor. The Hangman knocked at the door, which was opened by a very stout red-faced woman of fifty. She was dressed in a shabby black silk gown: a faded neckerchief, that once had displayed the gaudiest colours, was thrown over her immense shoulders;—and a dirty cap, adorned with tawdry ribands, was set awry upon her head, either through a lingering sentiment of coquetry which had not deserted her though she had fallen into the sere and yellow leaf,—or else for the less romantic reason of having been thrust aside in some scuffle. She wore a false front to conceal the hair which years of debauchery had tended even more than time to rob of its pristine darkness: the tip of her nose was rubicund and shining;—and if any other evidence had been wanting to prove her devotion to the bottle, it might have been perceived in the strong odour of the juniper which infected her breath. A trumpery mosaic chain hung round her great thick neck; and two or three flaring rings of base metal, set with great pieces of coloured glass, were stuck upon her very dirty fingers.

She held a candle in her hand: and the moment the light fell upon the Hangman's countenance, she exclaimed, "Ah! Mr. Coffin, is that you? Well, I raly am delighted to see you alive again, after hearing as how you was dead and feeding the fishes in the Thames. But howsomever you are not looking the wuss for your late adventures."

"Not a bit, mother: they did me good, on the contrary," observed the Hangman, with a low chuckle, and with as amiable a look as such a hangdog countenance as his own could possibly assume: "besides which, you see, I've resumed office at the Old Bailey again."

"I read all about it, Mr. Coffin, in the newspapers," returned the woman; "and I was struck all of a heap when I seed how sudden you turned up again. But I hope," she added with a leering smile of coarse familiarity, "that if so be I should come to Tuck-up Fair to dance upon nothing, you'll treat me as a lady should be treated at a gentleman's hands."

"That I will, mother," exclaimed Coffin, with a laugh which almost sounded ominous to the woman's ears, and made her repent of her joke as it sent a shudder coldly quivering through her frame. "Depend upon it that if ever you come to be taught the fall of a leaf in the Old Bailey, I'll make the hempen neckcloth as comfortable for your old neck as possible; and I'll let the drop fall so gentle under your feet, that you shall slide down as easy as a boy off a haystack."

"Well, come in—come in, Mr. Coffin," said Mrs. Young, somewhat impatiently, as if she had had quite enough of that terrible tragi-comic jesting. "Come in, I say, and wash your mouth out with a drop of summat short."

Thus speaking, the woman led the way into the little front parlour, where an immense fire blazed in the grate, giving forth a stifling heat. Huddled together on an old faded ricketty sofa, sate four young women, whose faces highly coloured with rouge, shameless exposure of the bosom, and immodest looks, but too plainly announced their avocation. Lounging in an arm-chair near the fire, sate Nell Gibson, with one of her feet upon an old footstool, and the other resting upon the hob—while her form was thrown back with a lascivious abandonment mingled with reckless indolence. She was however dressed more neatly and carefully than the girls upon the sofa, whose apparel was a mixture of poverty-stricken meanness and scantiness, disguised and embellished as much as possible by tawdry finery. But Nell Gibson wore a good stuff dress, cut very low in front so as to display the really fine bust which had not yet entirely lost the first freshness of youth. Her arms too were bare: but they were plump and white;—the hands were not only well made, but also scrupulously clean;—and her well shaped legs were provided with clean white stockings and a new pair of shoes. In fine, this young woman was altogether of a beauty that shone in remarkable contrast with the faded forms and worn-out looks of the girls upon the sofa. For, alas! although these latter females were still but mere girls as to age, yet were they old women—yes, old, old women in sad experience, and also in the waste and ruin of those charms which, even at the age of one or two-and-twenty, required cosmetics to conceal the ravages of dissipation!

Having paid his respects to Nell Gibson and the other females, the Hangman desired Mrs. Young to produce a couple of bottles of wine; and as he threw down a guinea at the same moment the woman bustled about with alacrity to give the necessary order. An old harridan of nearly ninety, bent double with age and who had passed the whole of her long life in houses of crime, acted as Mrs. Young's servant; and she was accordingly despatched to the nearest public-house to fetch the wine. When she returned and placed the bottles upon the table, the Hangman exclaimed in a bantering tone, "Halloa! Mother Franklin, are you still alive?"

"Yes, you see I be," answered the old hag, wagging her toothless jaws with a merry laugh.

"Why, how old are you now, you witch?" demanded the Hangman.

"Eighty-nine, come next Febiverry," responded the hag; "and you'll never reach that age, Mr. Coffin—for you're doomed to go out of the world in the same way as you've helped a many others to quit it:" and she laughed with a hideous cackling sound that presently merged into a choking cough which brought the scalding rheum into her bleared eyes.

"By Satan!" exclaimed Coffin, ferociously, "I shall have the satisfaction of tucking you up before I die, you infernal old beldame! Why, I don't believe you were ever in a respectable house in your life?"

"That's true enough," answered the hag, with her horrible chuckle. "I was born in such a house as this—I was bred in it—I became prematurely old in it," she continued, glancing significantly towards the girls upon the sofa. "I have been the child of crime—the mother of crime—and the widow of crime: and now I may say I am the great, great grandmother of crime! Lord bless ye, you won't see one in a thousand—no, nor yet one in a million—that comes to my age after passing all one's life in such houses as this here! They mostly die in ditches—or on dunghills—or in hospitals or workhouses—long, long before they come to even half my age!"

"Hold your tongue, you old witch!" ejaculated Nell Gibson, half starting from her chair in a rage. "I declare if you're allowed to let your tongue run on like this, I'll leave the house."

"It's shameful to let Mother Franklin talk just as she likes," observed the young females upon the sofa: but *they* did not threaten to leave the house—for they were entirely in Mrs. Young's power; whereas Nell Gibson was totally independent of the woman.

"There—take that, you old beldame, and be off!" said the Hangman savagely, tossing her a shilling.

Mother Franklin, who had thrown a look of diabolical spite upon Nell Gibson when she threatened to leave the house, now fastened the same malignant look upon the Hangman, muttering to herself, "What! only a shilling—a beggarly shilling, for fetching that wine and standing all this abuse:" then suddenly picking up the coin, she bustled out of the room, laughing with that hideous laugh which was between a cackle and a cough.

The Hangman, perceiving that he had just drawn the ancient harridan into a conversation which had thrown a damp upon the spirits of those present, hastened to pour out the wine and pass round the glasses, the contents of which were speedily disposed of. The girls upon the sofa were specially prompt in emptying their glasses; and they looked particularly satisfied when Mr. Coffin refilled them. Then, after chatting on various subjects for about a quarter of an hour, the Hangman said to Nell Gibson, "I want to speak to you upon very particular business."

She looked at him for a moment with a strange gaze, in which astonishment, indignation, and disgust were all clearly and plainly blended: then suddenly bursting out into a loud laugh, she said, "No, Mr. Coffin—any living soul but the public executioner!"

"What does the girl mean?" growled the Hangman, his countenance all of a sudden assuming a look of diabolical ferocity: but the next moment, recollecting that it was his policy to conciliate instead of angering Ellen Gibson, he said in as mild a tone as it was in his nature to adopt, "I didn't mean any tender proposal, Nell: but it's on a matter of business I want to speak to you—and so if you'll just put on your bonnet and shawl and step out with me, we can chat as we walk up and down the street: or may be you would step round as far as Bencull's for half-an-hour or so."

"No—I don't want to go out to night," said Nell: it's raw and damp, and I've got a cold. But we can talk here:"—and she made a sign to Mother Young and the four girls, who all took the hint accordingly and quitted the room. "Now, then, what is it?" inquired the young woman, still retaining her indolent attitude as she lolled in the arm-chair near the fire.

"And so you wouldn't have accepted me as your lover?" said the Hangman, with a jocose look, as he really began to feel somewhat excited by the provoking abandonment of the young woman's fine person in that attitude of indolent wantonness.

"Faugh! there is a smell about you as if you had been touching dead bodies," replied Nell, who was of a very independent spirit and did not mind saying what she thought: indeed, vile, depraved, remorseless prostitute as she was, and ready also to sell herself to even the most disgusting old men so long as she was adequately paid, she nevertheless recoiled in unfeigned loathing and aversion from the idea of such contact with the public executioner.

"Well, at all events you are candid, Nell," said Daniel Coffin after a brief pause, during which he bit his lip almost till the blood came, so desperate for a moment was his vexation at the disgust with which the young woman regarded him. "But come,—it's no use for you and me to wrangle while there's business to be done: so I suppose we are all good friends again?"

"To be sure," answered Nell, instantaneously recovering her good humour: "so long as you don't talk to me in a particular way, we shall be the best friends in the world, as we always have been hitherto;—and if there's anything to be done in which my services can be made handy, you know very well that you can command me."

"I am glad to hear you speak in this sensible way," said Coffin, laying aside all his recent resentment: "because there really is something important on hand. You recollect that night, down at the dark crib, when you enticed a young lady there——"

"To be sure!—and she had plenty of trinkets and a well-filled purse," exclaimed Nell, "out of all which we were shamefully bilked. But what of her?"

"Oh! nothing about *her*: but you remember that rascally knife-grinding fellow that undertook to send her into kingdom-come?"

"As if it was possible to forget that man whom we sent to sleep at the bottom of the black ditch," said the young woman, her tone and her looks both suddenly becoming serious.

"Yes—but what will you think," exclaimed the Hangman, "when I tell you that the fellow does not sleep at the bottom of the black ditch at all—but on the contrary must have been awoke into consciousness and life when plunged into that slimy pool?—and what else will you think when I tell you that not only is that knife-grinder safe and sound in the land of the living, but that he is none other than our mortal enemy Larry Sampson?"

With a surprise that rapidly increased into a speechless wonderment, did Nell Gibson hear the announcements thus made by Daniel Coffin: and even before she could so far recover from this stupefaction as to be able to give utterance to a word, did the Hangman proceed to recite the same account as he had already given to Bencull concerning his visit to Larry Sampson's house and the discoveries he had made through the agency of the great book. We need hardly say that Nell Gibson's surprise soon became commingled with alarm and dismay: for there were many episodes in her career which she had hitherto fancied to be utterly unsuspected by the myrmidons of justice, but which, from what the Hangman now told her, were indeed too well known to Larry Sampson. It was true that, save and except her share in the attempt to murder the officer when disguised as a knife-grinder, there was no enormous crime which could positively and unquestionably be brought home to her: otherwise, perhaps, Larry would not have allowed her to remain at large so long;—but it was quite clear that he knew *more* about her than was pleasant to be thus known, and that such knowledge of her antecedents would render her future career an object of constant suspicion and surveillance, thereby planting as it were a thousand hidden dangers in her way.

When, therefore, the Hangman proposed that she should embark in some enterprise the aim of which was nothing less than the murder of the Bow Street Officer, she experienced no compunction in giving a prompt and even cheerful assent to the scheme. Coffin then proceeded to develop his views, in the discussion of which the extraordinary keenness and astuteness of the young woman afforded no inconsiderable help, leading to many practical suggestions of importance to the infernal project. Finally, after a lengthened deliberation, the Hangman and Nell Gibson came to a complete understanding together; and the former, taking leave of Mother Young's establishment, returned to the dark crib in Jacob's Island, to report to Bencull the success of his mission.

But little did either Daniel Coffin or Nell Gibson suspect that throughout their private interview and important colloquy, old Mother Franklin—the toothless harridan belonging to Mrs. Young's establishment—had been listening eagerly and breathlessly at the key-hole of the parlour door.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

VENETIA AND HER ADMIRERS.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the occurrences just related;—and it was now the middle of November—that month of short days and dark fogs in which Englishmen are reputed to show a greater predilection for suicide than at any other season of the year.

On the particular evening of which we are about to write, the Prince Regent was entertaining at his dinner-table Lord and Lady Sackville, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and the Earl of Curzon. The reader will therefore perceive that it was quite a select little party; and Venetia, being the only lady present, was of course compelled to render herself as agreeable as possible. We were wrong, however, to use the word *compelled*: because the beautiful creature possessed that admirable tact, lady-like discernment, and natural flow of spirits, which always enabled her to be affable and agreeable without an effort; and the spells of fascination seemed to belong as naturally to her manners as loveliness hung like a charm upon her person, or as the sweetest and richest melody poured itself forth in the tones of her voice.

It will be remembered that the Earl of Curzon had cherished a great deal of animosity towards Venetia, not only for having rejected his advances, but also for having bestowed her hand upon Horace Sackville: and the reader may likewise suppose that Venetia on her side did not immediately forget the cowardly threats which the Earl had held forth when he visited her at Acacia Cottage, or the malignant irony of his manner when he *congratulated* her immediately after the ceremony at St. George's, Hanover Square. But when Horace and Venetia became not only Lord and Lady Sackville, but also took up their quarters at Carlton House and were at once admitted by the acclamation of the whole fashionable world to be the idols of the day,—no sooner, we say, were the newly-married couple thus elevated on so lofty a pedestal, than the Earl of Curzon was one of the first to pay his court to them. For he felt that to be at war with Horace and Venetia, would amount to total exclusion from the banquets, the balls, and the soirées at Carlton House; and to such exclusion the Earl's vanity would not permit him to submit. Swallowing, therefore, his resentment and putting the best possible face upon the matter, he had hastened to make his peace with the Sackvilles; and they had succeeded too well in their ambitious projects not to be able to afford forgiveness in this respect. Indeed, it had become a part of the conventional tactics of Horace and Venetia not to make enemies if they could prevent it, and to disarm all existing hostilities, so as to afford as little impulse as possible to the ill-natured things which were certain to be said relative to individuals who had experienced so sudden and remarkable an elevation to rank, fortune, and power.

The Earl of Curzon was a consummate hypocrite when it suited his purpose to act with duplicity; and no sooner had he made his peace with the Sackvilles, when he became most fervid in his

demonstrations of friendship towards them. He made Lord Sackville a present of a splendid horse; and he now and then sent Venetia beautiful bouquets of flowers, the newly-published prints, and such gifts as a gentleman may without indiscretion proffer to a lady. All this he did without any obtrusiveness or any apparently interested motive: his visits were not more frequent than they ought to be;—and he invariably behaved with the most courteous respect towards Lady Sackville. The result was that his past conduct was at length pretty well forgotton; and though he was not perhaps regarded in the light of a friend, he at all events was considered as a very intimate acquaintance.

And now a word or two with regard to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Upwards of a fortnight had elapsed since that memorable evening on which the Baronet and Venetia had met in the ante-room leading to the saloon where the aristocratic young ladies had made a pastime of dancing and throwing flowers around the Prince. During this fortnight Sir Douglas, emboldened by the encouragement which Venetia appeared to give him upon that occasion, had become a more frequent visitor at the suite of apartments which she and Horace occupied at Carlton House; and it is quite certain that he received no discouragement on the part of Venetia. On the contrary, she always managed to be "at home" to *him;* and when he took his leave of her on each occasion, she generally contrived to give him a hint as to the most convenient hour for him to call the next day. At the outset of these visits, he had ventured to press her hand to his lips; and the chiding he received was so gentle that it did not prevent him from snatching a kiss from the damask cheek. At the next visit, therefore—as this boldness on his part had excited but a moderate degree of resentment,—he was venturous enough to cull the sweets of her delicious mouth. This liberty experienced no very cruel chastisement; and therefore Sir Douglas felt himself justified in cherishing the fervid hope that ere long these little favours which he obtained in detail would be crowned by the complete surrender of the fortress.

Thus stood matters at the time specified at the opening of this chapter; namely, on that evening in the middle of November when we thus find the Sackvilles, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon dining with the Prince Regent.

It was about nine o'clock—the dessert had just been placed upon the table—and the wine was beginning to circulate pretty freely, save with respect to Venetia herself. Nevertheless, a little champagne which she had taken at dinner, and the glass of fine old port which she was just sipping now, had slightly enhanced the bloom upon her cheeks—deepening it into a richer carnation—while her beautiful blue eyes appeared to swim in a more softly sensuous and melting languor. Delicious, too, was the dewy moisture of those lips which seemed to invite the tenderest kisses, and to be able to give them back again;—and as the lustre of the lamps shone upon her rich auburn hair, crowning her with light and setting forth the grandeur of her forehead in all its alabaster purity, she appeared to be one of those beings who can only have an ideal existence in the verse of the poet or the page of the novelist.

It was about half past nine, when a footman entered and whispered something in the ear of the Prince.

"Show his lordship up immediately," exclaimed his Royal Highness aloud: then, so soon as the servant had retired, he observed, "It is Leveson, who has just come back from Paris: and as a matter of course he will be welcome amongst us."

"Oh! assuredly," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "But what did he go to Paris for?"

"Ah! that, I suppose, is *his* secret," replied the Prince, who however knew full well wherefore the Marquis had gone so suddenly abroad more than a month previously, and why he had remained so long in the French capital.

The Marquis of Leveson now made his appearance; and when the usual greetings and complimentary phrases were exchanged, he took a seat on the left hand of the Prince,—Venetia being on the right of his Royal Highness. The conversation was continued upon general subjects for some time: but presently, when Lord Sackville, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon had become involved in a warm though friendly discussion upon some moot-point, to which Venetia was listening with great interest, the Prince and the Marquis of Leveson seized the opportunity to exchange a few hurried and whispered observations.

"What news?" inquired the Prince.

"Did you not receive letters from me yesterday, stating that I should be home to day?" asked Leveson.

"Yes," replied the Prince. "And nothing, I suppose, is changed since the date at which you wrote those letters?"

"Nothing," returned the Marquis. "As you are aware, Julia Owen has gone on to rejoin her sisters in Italy——"

"Yes—that I know well enough," interrupted the Prince: "and she must have reached them by this time. Why, it is a fortnight since you despatched her from Paris, on the failure of that precious affair between her and the falsely styled Jocelyn Loftus."

At the mention of this name, which caught Venetia's ear, she gave a start—though it was unperceived by any one present. Then, while apparently continuing to listen with interest to the discussion between her husband, the Earl, and the Baronet, she in reality lent an earnest and attentive ear to the whispered and confidential discourse that was going on between the Prince Regent and the Earl of Leveson. The latter proceeded to make certain observations relative to Jocelyn Loftus, which revealed to the ears of Venetia a remarkable secret in connexion with that young gentleman,—showing to her how it was that the Prince had ere now spoken of him as the *falsely styled Jocelyn Loftus.*

But why is Venetia interested in aught that concerns Jocelyn Loftus?—does she know him?—has she ever seen him? In a word, wherefore has her heart begun to flutter like a frightened bird in its cage?—and why does it need all her resolution—all her firmness—all her presence of mind to prevent the betrayal of those emotions which the mention of this name has suddenly excited within her bosom?

We cannot answer these questions at present:—and therefore must we pursue, without delay, the thread of our narrative.

"And is he still in the Prefecture?" inquired the

Prince, continuing the whispered discourse with Leveson, while Venetia was straining every sense to catch each word that passed between them.

"Yes," returned the Marquis. "What else could possibly be done with him? He is proof against all temptation: his virtue would put the old Stoic philosophers to shame;—and if he were set at large he would blow to the winds all that fine scheme which, if successful, will relieve you from the trammels of your accursed marriage."

"But will the French Government consent to retain him a prisoner much longer?" asked the Prince. "Seeing that the pretext is so shallow, I fear lest it should be under the necessity of setting him at liberty."

"Not at all," returned the Marquis. "King Louis acknowledges his obligation to succour your Royal Highness to the utmost of his power—and he pledged himself to me to do so."

"Then the imprisonment of that madbrained, obstinate young man is likely to be prolonged indeed?" said the Prince. "But what have you done with that beautiful Louisa Stanley of whom you wrote to me in such glaring colours?"

"Would you believe it, sir—I have brought her back from Paris and managed to entice her to Albemarle Street," said the Marquis, with a leer of most sensual satisfaction.

"Do you mean to say that you have already won that prize?" asked the Prince.

"No—no—not yet. I have been playing the paternal—and she looks up to me quite as a father. She has got a sister somewhere in London: but she has evidently mistaken the address of this sister's residence. However, I will tell you all about this another time: suffice it to say that Louisa is a charming creature—and I have obtained such influence over——"

The whispered dialogue between the Prince and the Marquis, and the animated discussion on the part of Sackville, Curzon, and Huntingdon, were both alike interrupted at this particular moment by the circumstance of Venetia suddenly upsetting her wine-glass by a too abrupt movement which she made: and as the wine was spilt upon the rich satin dress that she wore, she started from her seat, evidently much confused and chagrined at an accident which had drawn all eyes upon her. Then faltering forth a few words of apology, she hurried from the room.

Hastening to her own chamber, she threw herself upon the sofa and fell into a profound reverie. Painful it no doubt was; for her troubled spirit seemed to look through the eyes that were bent down fixedly, beaming not with a voluptuous languor now:—painful, too, that reverie was, because the colour had fled from her cheeks and an unrelieved pallor sate upon her countenance. Presently she pressed her hand forcibly to her heart, as if to still its throbbings: and that superb bosom which was wont to swell so warmly and glowingly with amorous emotions, now appeared to palpitate beneath the empire of other and far different thoughts.

But suddenly starting from the sofa, she assumed a look of forced composure—that look which an energetic woman puts on, when, in the presence of dangers, difficulties, or annoyances suddenly starting up before her, she resolves to adopt a decisive course. Ringing the bell to summon her faithful attendant Jessica, Venetia hastened to put off the soiled dress and array herself in another robe. Then, ere she quitted the chamber, she said to Jessica—"You must hasten up to Stratton Street at once, and tell Miss Bathurst that it is probable inquiries may be made for a certain person and that she must be upon her guard accordingly. Whisper this much in Miss Bathurst's ear: or if Miss Bathurst should not happen to be at home, tell it to Mrs. Arbuthnot, and the meaning of the message will be thoroughly understood."

Having given these instructions, Lady Sackville descended to the saloon belonging to the suite of apartments which she and her husband occupied at Carlton House;—and after remaining there for a short time, until she had entirely regained an outward appearance of calmness as well as some of the lost carnation hues upon her cheeks, she rang the bell and ordered her serious-looking valet, who answered the summons, to go and inform his Royal Highness and his guests that she should be happy to see them to take coffee with her.

Half-an-hour afterwards, the Prince, the Marquis, the Earl, and the Baronet, accompanied of course by Lord Sackville himself, repaired to the saloon where Venetia was thus awaiting their presence: and as the company partook of the fragrant coffee and the choice liqueurs which followed, she conversed as gaily and as cheerfully as if she had experienced no sudden paroxysm of low spirits during the entire evening.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had seated himself next to her at the tea-table: and the influence of the wine he had drunk, mingling with that of her transcendent charms and the melody of her fluid voice, filled him with a species of delirious intoxication which rendered all control of his feelings a matter of utter impossibility. Availing himself, therefore, of a moment when no one else observed him, and hurried along by an irresistible current of ecstatic emotions, he whispered, "By heaven! Venetia, you are adorable to-night! O for one hour of your love—and I would cheerfully resign all the remainder of my existence to enjoy it!"

"Are you serious?—and would you do me a great—a very great service?" she inquired, in a low deep whisper, accompanying her words by a look which seemed to blend a profound earnestness of purpose with a tender intimation that she was willing to pay the highest price which woman can give for the service to which she had just alluded.

"Tell me what I can do for you, adorable being!" murmured the enraptured Baronet: "and I will peril my life in your service."

Venetia threw a hurried glance around; and perceiving that this rapid and whispered colloquy at the tea-table was still unobserved, she darted a sudden look of vivid intelligence upon the Baronet, saying in an equally hurried but low-breathed tone at the same time, "I will write presently upon a slip of paper that which I should blush to say in your presence!"

Having thus given a sort of promise to which the Baronet instantaneously attached the tenderest and most delicious interpretation, Venetia rose from her seat;—and crossing the room, she threw herself upon a sofa at the farther end, as if to get as far as possible from the heat of the very large fire that was blazing in the grate.

The Earl of Curzon now approached her; and negligently taking a seat by her side, he began to converse upon a variety of those topics which make up the sum of fashionable discourse. But Venetia was pre-occupied with other and more important matters,—so that at times she fell into a pensive mood, from which she would suddenly start and then gaze upon the Earl with a look of vacant inquiry, as if in wonder at what he had been saying. In fact, there was altogether a peculiarity in her manner which she could not control, and which she even rendered more strange by attempting to subdue it, or to repair the awkwardness of its effects.

Now the Earl of Curzon had been drinking freely: and the wine had produced upon him a certain excitement which the magic of Venetia's charms speedily enhanced to an almost frenzied degree. Thus, losing his head as it were in the fumes of the generous grape and in the intoxicating influences of his own desires, he mistook that peculiarity of Venetia's manner for the embarrassment and confusion attendant upon a favourable feeling experienced towards himself. His vanity assisted this belief: and thus blindly abandoning himself to it, he ventured to touch Venetia's hand with a significant tenderness. She perceived the circumstance and threw upon him a glance which was about to shoot forth the fires of indignation, when all in a moment the truth flashed to her mind. She remembered that her manner had been strange and pre-occupied; and this recollection furnished her with the key to the mystery of the Earl's conduct. Yes—it was quite clear: he fancied she was in love with him, and that all the last half-hour's absence of mind and pre-occupation were the proofs of this affection on her part!

Thus was it that the sudden flashing of the truth to her comprehension checked the indignation which her looks were about to pour forth upon the Earl;—and at the same moment another thought sprang up in her mind. But this second thought was of importance to herself,—suggestive as it was of a means by which she could render the Earl serviceable in certain matters upon which she had this night resolved.

Suffering, therefore, her hand to remain in contact with his own, she bent upon him a look into which she threw as much tenderness and encouragement as she dared without incurring the risk of being deemed too ready to accept his overtures and too willing to fling herself into his arms.

"Have you forgiven me for the insolence of my conduct on the first day of our acquaintance?" he inquired, in a low voice.

"Most assuredly," she softly answered. "Has not my conduct proved this much?"

"Ah! if I dared to hope," murmured the Earl, with a sigh.

"If I were to bid you hope," whispered Venetia, after a few instants' pause, and speaking as if in obedience to the sudden impulse of a feeling stronger than herself,—"would you be ready to perform any service which I might demand?"

"Did you order me to kill myself at your feet as a proof of my devotion," responded the Earl, transported with raptures and incredulous even to the amount of that happiness which the present discourse inspired,—"I would do it unhesitatingly—Oh! unhesitatingly this moment!"

"And you swear by your God, and by your honour as a man," whispered Venetia, earnestly and even solemnly, "that you will keep secret whatever may pass between us?"

"I will—I will," answered the Earl. "I would sooner die than deceive you!"

Venetia appeared satisfied with this reply: for her looks brightened up, and she threw upon the nobleman a glance of mingled gratitude and tenderness. Then, after reflecting deeply for a few moments, she said, "I cannot tell you more now—but presently I will slip a note into your hand."

Having given the Earl this assurance, which seemed to promise joys and favours that should crown him with a triumph and a bliss which even an hour before appeared to be not merely incalculably remote but scarcely probable or possible at all—having thus breathed those honied words of hope, we say, Venetia rose from the sofa and advanced towards the Prince and the others who were standing in a group before the fire and conversing upon some animated topic of politics.

But as Venetia thus drew near, that topic, usually considered to be so unwelcome to ladies, was instantly abandoned; and the Prince, fixing his eyes upon his beautiful mistress, said, "Is your ladyship inclined to favour us with music? or are we to betake ourselves to cards?"

"I am somewhat indisposed this evening, sir," answered Venetia, "and cannot sing. Indeed, it is my intention to retire early: but if you will agree to amuse yourselves with cards, I am sure that Horace will himself make you a bowl of curaçoa punch according to that receipt which you have all on former occasions pronounced to be so fine. I presume your Royal Highness does not wish us to stand on ceremony?" added Venetia, with one of her most winning and fascinating smiles: "and no one beyond these walls need know that the Lord Steward of the Regent's Household condescends to manufacture punch."

There was a great deal of laughing and joking at this proposition so goodnaturedly and humorously made; and we need hardly say that it was at once accepted. The Prince, the Marquis, the Earl, and the Baronet sate down to whist; and Lord Sackville retired into his dining-room to make the punch. Thither he was presently followed by Venetia; and as she assured herself that he had every ingredient he required, she observed in a low tone and with a sudden pouting of her beautiful lips, "After all, I am sorry that I proposed this very inebriating mixture."

"And wherefore?" asked her husband, astonished at the remark.

"Because," she replied, with a downcast look and a glow upon her cheeks, "as I just quitted the saloon, the Prince made a sign which I could not but too well understand ——"

"Ah! I know what you mean," observed Sackville, biting his lip. "The Prince means to pass the night with you."

But the blush almost immediately passed away from Venetia's countenance, and the pang which shot through her husband's heart was only momentary: for the delicacy of feeling which had conjured up the former and produced the latter, was almost completely extinguished within their breasts so far as their connexion as man and wife was concerned.

Alas! alas! that such dread depravity should have prevailed where there was so much beauty, such intelligence, and such naturally god-like qualities on either side!

Venetia now left her husband to continue the manufacture of the punch, while she hastened up to her own boudoir: and sitting down to her writing desk, she penned the following note, which she intended for the Earl of Curzon:—

"I promised that I would slip a few lines into your hand; and I keep my word. The reason why I thus commit myself to paper is to furnish you with a proof of my sincerity, so that in return you may hesitate not to render me the great and important service which I require at your hands. Come to me to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock. I will receive you in my boudoir, where we may converse for half-an-hour without restraint.

"VENETIA."

Having penned this note in her beautiful fluent hand, Lady Sackville took another piece of paper and wrote thereon the following words, intended for Sir Douglas Huntingdon:—

"I promised that I would slip a note into your hand this evening; and I keep my word. Yes—I love thee; and I accept thy love in return! The reason why I write these lines is because I can make upon paper that appointment which I should never have dared to breathe with my lips The punch will be strong: you can affect to be overcome by it; and Sackville will offer you a chamber for the night in our suite of apartments I shall be *alone* in my boudoir, the door of which faces the marble statue of Diana in the gallery.

"VENETIA."

Having concluded this second billet, Venetia proceeded to fold each up into the smallest possible compass; and thrusting one into the right bosom of her dress and the other into the left, she returned to the saloon. There she found the card-playing going on and the punch already served round. At that moment, too, the Earl of Curzon

was rising from the card-tables to make room for Horace, who accordingly sat down to take a hand in the game; and Venetia now therefore found a speedy opportunity of thrusting one of the notes into the hand of the Earl of Curzon. This manœuvre was of course unperceived by everybody else; and the Earl, after flinging a look expressive of fervid gratitude upon her ladyship, quitted the room.

In a few minutes he returned; and she read in his looks the ineffable delight which filled his soul. She accordingly understood full well that he had sought an opportunity to read her billet, and that he could know not a greater happiness than that of complying with its contents.

In a short time Sir Douglas Huntingdon rose from the table, declaring that "he was in no humour to play at cards to-night;"—and the Prince Regent accordingly desired the Earl of Curzon to join the whist party again. To this request, which was a command when coming from Royalty, the nobleman immediately yielded; and Sir Douglas went and placed himself by the side of Venetia, who had taken a chair at some little distance.

Watching her opportunity, when the card-players were most intent on their game, Lady Sackville slipped the other note into the baronet's hand;—and soon afterwards, it being now past midnight, she retired to her own chamber.

CHAPTER LXXV.

THE BOUDOIR.

On thus retiring to her elegant boudoir, Venetia neither rang immediately for her maid to help her to lay aside her apparel, nor did she commence her night-toilette alone: but flinging herself on the sofa near the fire, she gave way to her reflections.

A deep melancholy crept over her—and tears even stole forth upon her long dark lashes: then, as if it were a positive luxury to escape from the hollowness, the falsity, and the demoralization of a Court-life even for a few minutes, and to indulge in the unrestrained thought which the solitude of her own chamber permitted, she murmured audibly, "Yes—let me weep—let me weep!"

And Venetia wept—not violently, like the rains pouring forth from an angry heaven to beat down the fairest flowers and crush the sweetest buds of promise—but softly and gently, like the April showers descending with a genial influence to give freshness to nature's expanding verdure in garden, grove, and field. Thus did Venetia's tears fertilize as it were her memory and her heart for the time being;—and all the tenderest recollections that the former cherished, and all the sweetest feelings of woman's nature which the latter harboured, were revived into freshness and wooed into bloom by the gentle shower that fell from the deep blue heaven of her eyes.

Presently she rose from the sofa—passed behind a low screen which partitioned off one corner of the elegantly furnished boudoir—and opened a splendid bureau or cabinet made of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Thence she took forth her jewel-box: but her eyes shone not with pleasure at the view of the flashing gems which the box contained. No: for these she recked not now—and the object of her search was nothing more than a small packet of letters tied round with a simple white riband. Returning to her seat upon the sofa, Venetia began to examine these letters, which were all written in the same hand—and this hand was a beautiful female one, closely resembling her own fluid and elegant writing.

But as she ran her eyes over certain passages in that correspondence, the tears rained down her cheeks; and at length she wept so copiously that through the half blinding floods she beheld the paper and the writing on it as through a mist. But this outpouring of her heart's long pent-up feelings proved an immense relief—an incalculable solace: and wiping from her eyes the last pearl-drops which hung upon the long, dark, softly curved lashes, she tied up the packet of letters with the white riband and restored them to the jewel-box. Then, having consigned the box itself to the secure keeping of the ebony-cabinet, she rang the bell for Jessica.

The summons was not answered with the abigail's wonted promptitude—and after allowing three or four minutes' license, Venetia rang again. This time the summons was speedily responded to;—and Jessica came hurrying into the boudoir, with an apology and an explanation upon her lips for the previous neglect and delay.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon most sincerely," she said: "but I was busily engaged at the moment your ladyship's bell rang the first time, in seeing that the spare bed-room was put into order——"

"The spare bed-room!" ejaculated Venetia, affecting surprise.

"Yes, my lady," returned Jessica: "it appears that one of the guests in the saloon has taken the least drop too much——"

"Ah! indeed," said Venetia. "And who is it that has thus forgotten himself?"

"I don't know which of the guests it is, my lady," replied Jessica: "indeed, I didn't hear his name mentioned at all. My lord," she continued, alluding to Horace, "came out and gave the hurried order that the spare bed-room was to be got ready immediately—and that was the reason I did not fly to answer your ladyship's bell when it rang the first time."

"I am not angry, Jessica," said Venetia, smiling. "And while I think of it, I may as well observe that as I do not feel very well to-night, I shall perhaps take breakfast in bed in the morning. At all events you need not come to me until I ring."

"Very good, my lady," observed Jessica, as she combed out Venetia's magnificent auburn hair, which was glossy and smooth as velvet, and shining as dark gold—so luxuriant that it could be spread like a veil all over her shoulders and her bosom—and so long that it reached far below her waist.

"And you will tell the footman in the morning," continued Venetia, "in case I should forget to mention it again, that any one who calls at eleven o'clock in the forenoon punctually is to be shown straight up hither—as I expect some one on business of importance."

"Your ladyship's commands shall be attended to," said Jessica.

The night-toilette progressed: the masses of silken, auburn hair were gathered loosely up with a sort of graceful negligence beneath an elegant lace cap:—and having laid aside her apparel, Venetia dismissed her attendant for the night. Putting on a muslin wrapper, beautifully worked, and edged with the costliest lace, she threw herself upon the sofa;—and as she lay half-reclining there, the dark-purple velvet of that sofa formed a back-ground to throw forth her superb form in all its grandest and most voluptuous effects.

The gorgeous contours of the bust, left half-exposed in their dazzling whiteness by the loose wrapper,— the fine moulding of the form and the admirable proportions of the limbs, displayed by the folds of the very muslin which enveloped them,—constituted a picture so exquisitely beautiful and yet so sensuously luxurious that a saint must have worshipped Venetia as the idol of devotion, and must have sunk into her arms even though it were tasting the forbidden fruit that would entail the loss of Paradise!

But what were Venetia's thoughts as she thus lay half-reclining upon that sofa, in all the voluptuous abandonment of a rich glowing form draped only with the night-gear and the loose muslin wrapper, and in an atmosphere that was warm and perfumed? For the fire of red-hot coals was heaped high up in the grate; and three or four porcelain vases exhaled a delicious fragrance. If anything were calculated to encourage sensations of softly longing wantonness,—the very attitude, the dress. the warmth, the perfume, the luxurious aspect of the boudoir, the silence of the hour, the mellow light shed by a lamp placed upon the table,—all these circumstances and influences were of themselves sufficient to produce that effect upon a woman of glowing temperament and who had abjured all notions of prudery. But when to these provocative and exciting causes was superadded the fact that she had given an appointment to an admirer, and that she was now every moment expecting this admirer's presence, it may well be supposed that Venetia's heart was already fluttering with desire, and that her cheeks were flushing, her eyes looking languid, and her bosom palpitating in the expectation of that deeper delirium and more frenetic whirl of pleasure into which the enjoyments of love would shortly plunge her.

But such would not have been her sensations were she expecting the Prince Regent instead of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. And here let us observe that His Royal Highness had in reality given her no intimation, ere now in the saloon, that he purposed to inflict his presence upon her this night: she had merely made the statement to her husband in order to ensure the uninterrupted privacy of her boudoir for herself and the Baronet. But now the reader will possibly ask whether Venetia experienced any genuine or sincere affection for Sir Douglas Huntingdon. No—not at all. It was but a passing whim and a phantasy of the moment that had in the first instance led her to give him the slightest encouragement on that night when they met in the ante-room and became companion spectators of the scene that was passing the other side of the glass door on that occasion. Since then she had gone on encouraging him in the frequency of his visits—she had allowed him to become more and more familiar with her—she had also permitted him to bestow those little caresses upon her which she received without chiding,—all this she had done, we say, simply because, the barrier of virtue once broken down, she neither had the courage, the inclination, nor the self-respect sufficient to check the development of that natural wantonness which was hurrying her on into actual profligacy. Nor was it indeed likely that a young and lovely woman of fervid temperament, who had abandoned herself to the Prince, whom she loathed, in order that she might further her ambitious projects, would now hesitate to gratify a longing, however transient it might be, in which a really handsome and agreeable man like Sir Douglas Huntingdon was concerned. Moreover, Venetia required his services in a very important and delicate matter; and she therefore was willing to bestow upon him the tenderest and most precious mark of favour which a woman can possibly concede.

The reader has already seen that Venetia married Horace Sackville rather as a matter of convenience than through any other cause;—and therefore the impression which his handsome person, his fascinating manners, his fine intellect, and his ardent but short-lived devotion had made upon her during the first two or three weeks of their engagement and marriage, was rather an influence acting upon the senses than on the sentiment. It was the first stirring up and development of those naturally strong animal passions which she possessed; and therefore, as no deeper nor more tender or enduring tie bound her to her husband, it cannot be astonishing that she should so soon have turned her wanton regards elsewhere. Moreover, even if she had really and truly loved Horace at all, this affection must naturally have received a ruinous shock by the fact that within three weeks after her marriage, he—the husband of this woman of transcendent beauty—had permitted her to resign herself coldly, systematically, and deliberately into the arms of the Prince! True, all this was arranged, foreknown, and agreed upon, even before their marriage;—true, it was a joint-stock patchwork of ambitions, with deeper ramifications however than the reader has yet learnt, that had to be based upon this marriage;—true also, that after Venetia's fall there were occasional intervals of compunction, remorse, weepings, and consolings, between the guilty wife and her pander-husband;—true likewise, that their first plungings into depravity and selfishness were characterised by occasional bursts of maudlin sentiment as well perhaps as of that genuine feeling which was not altogether crushed beneath the weight of conscious infamy;—yes, true enough were all these circumstances and phases in the history of Horace and Venetia: but still, in their sober and serious moments, the wife could now only look upon the husband as the willing accomplice of her shame, and the husband could only regard the wife as a polluted profligate!

If we have paused to place all these explanatory details upon record, it has only been for the purpose of showing that Venetia was not likely to experience remorse or compunction while awaiting the presence of the admirer whom she was now expecting. On the contrary—as she lay pillowed upon the flocculent cushions of the sofa, cradled in the soft sensuousness of her own thoughts—receiving upon her slightly clad person the warmth

of that bright red fire,—in an atmosphere flooded with the serenely mellowed light, and filled with a delicious fragrance,—she seemed resolved as it were to abandon herself wholly to the pleasure of the present moment in order that she might the more deeply luxuriate in the enjoyments that were soon to come. Thus were her passions gradually exciting themselves and her desires being worked up to the highest degree, not only by the scope which she allowed her imagination to take and the bliss in which she permitted her fancy to run riot, but also by the surrounding influences of the scene.

At length, when she was becoming absolutely impatient of delay and wondering wherefore Sir Douglas Huntingdon came not, a gentle tap at the door reached her ear and thrilled like a galvanic flood of ecstacy through her entire frame. She rose —she unlocked the door—and then she flew back to the sofa, a sudden but momentary feeling of shame seizing her at the idea of appearing in that semi-nude condition in the presence of one to whose embraces she was as yet a stranger.

She heard him enter—close the door—then lock it again with strictest caution; and a moment afterwards he was by her side, snatching her in his arms and covering her with caresses. But, heavens! what words can depict the surprise—the amazement—nay, even the consternation which seized upon her, when instead of being strained to the breast of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, she found herself in the arms of the Earl of Curzon!

But at the same instant—yes, at the very same moment that she made this discovery—did the truth flash to her comprehension. She must have given the wrong letter to the Earl! There could be no doubt about it: it was the only way to account for the present occurence—and moreover, it was an accident that after all might so easily have happened, seeing that neither note was addressed to any particular individual.

Thanks to that consternation which thus seized upon Venetia at the moment she found herself clasped in the arms of the Earl of Curzon, she gave vent to no cry—no ejaculation: and her presence of mind instantaneously returning, her resolve was taken almost as soon as the discovery of the misadventure itself was made. This resolve was to resign herself to circumstances! Refusal would be impossible as well as ridiculous in respect to a man who not only had her at this instant in his power, but who doubless could also produce the letter in pursuance of which he had come thither. Besides which, the ardent kisses that Curzon lavished upon her, speedily renewed those sensuous feelings which she had herself been irritating by her imagination and fostering by her fancy: and thus was it that in a very few moments the Earl became the object of all those desires with which the image of the Baronet had inspired her!

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It was between eight and nine o'clock in the morning that the Earl of Curzon stole forth from Venetia's boudoir and crept back to the chamber which had been allotted to himself. To say that he was happy were to say nothing: his countenance was radiant with triumph! Pecuniary embarrassments—troubles for the present—anxieties for the future—and the dark suspicion that still rankled in his mind relative to his own wife,—all, all, were forgotten—all utterly lost sight of—all absorbed as it were in the one grand ecstatic reflection that Venetia—the incomparable Venetia—had abandoned herself to his arms.

But how strange—how passing strange was this consummation—this sort of realization of the pledge which he had made two months back when he stood in her presence at Acacia Cottage! He had then said, "I have sworn to possess you, and I will keep my vow. Be you guarded by all the angels of heaven, I will invoke all the devils of hell to succour me in carrying out my resolve!" But without violence—without craft—without the succour of any of those infernal powers which he had threatened to enlist in his service, he had obtained the object of his wishes. It was scarcely a triumph: no—it was *not* a triumph, because there was no preliminary resistance offered. He had been invited to take possession of the citadel at a moment when he had not been dreaming of making warfare against it; and it had surrendered not merely at discretion, but willingly, cheerfully, joyfully!

Such were the Earl's thoughts on regaining the chamber which had been assigned to him. But perhaps his vanity would have been somewhat shocked, although his sensuous satisfaction might not have been less, had some little bird whispered in his ear the secret that it was purely and simply through a *mistake* he had been blessed with Venetia's love that night!

Immediately after the Earl of Curzon had stolen forth from the boudoir, Lady Sackville rose from the couch of illicit pleasure and rang the bell. Jessica speedily made her appearance; and the business of the toilette then commenced. Still bent upon retaining that empire which she had already gained, over the mind of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, Venetia took considerable pains with herself in order to set off her charms to the greatest advantage. She ordered Jessica to allow her hair to fall in long flowing masses over her shoulders and down her back;—and she chose a dress which, fitting close to her shape, developed its noble contours in their luxuriant fulness and their rounded plumpness. Nor did Jessica, who loved her mistress and was proud of her,—more than ever proud of her, indeed, since she had become a peeress and also the *favourite* of the Prince Regent,—Jessica, we say, did not fail to lavish her usual praises, encomia, and compliments upon Venetia's charms.

"Assuredly your ladyship has the finest hair I ever saw," observed the abigail. "Here it is a shining mass of gold where the light falls upon it —there it is of a glossy velvet darkness where the shade remains. If your ladyship were a queen, this glorious hair would render a crown needless. And your ladyship's neck—it is of dazzling whiteness—arching so gracefully too. Permit me to arrange the body of your ladyship's dress. There! now it exhibits the fine slope of the shoulders: how ravishing a picture to the eyes of a male admirer! Pardon me, my lady, for venturing the observation—but your bust is the grandest—the finest—the most superb that ever woman possessed. There is but one lady I ever saw who can at all compare with your ladyship in this respect——"

"And who is that?" asked Venetia, with a smile

of ill-subdued satisfaction at her abigail's compliments.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," responded Jessica. "But though her bust is certainly very fine, it is not equal to your ladyship's. And now, if your ladyship would permit me to suggest that a fan has become an elegant appendage to even a morning costume ——"

"To be sure!—a fashion just imported from France," observed Venetia, as she negligently took the fan which Jessica presented to her.

But we will not linger upon this portion of our narrative. Suffice it to say that it was eleven o'clock by the time Lady Sackville had finished her toilette and partaken of breakfast: and punctually as her watch indicated that hour, was Sir Douglas Huntingdon ushered up into the boudoir.

Now be it understood that Venetia was guilty of no indiscretion, according to the notions then prevalent in the fashionable world, in thus receiving a male visitor in her private apartment. It was then a common custom, borrowed from the French; and therefore Lady Sackville did not compromise herself before her servants by thus granting an audience to the Baronet in that boudoir.

Receiving him with the most winning and enchanting affability, she seated herself near the toilette-table and pointed to a chair close by, which he immediately took.

"I am punctual to the appointment with which you have honoured—may I not rather say *favoured* me!" he observed, gazing tenderly upon her: and this remark was a further proof, if any additional one were wanting, that she had made a mistake in delivering the notes on the preceding evening.

"My dear Douglas," she said, for the first time addressing him thus familiarly, by his Christian name,—"there is nothing you can ask of me which I will not grant, provided you consent to do me that great and essential service to which I alluded last night."

"Have I not declared that you may command me even unto the very death?" exclaimed the Baronet, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips.

"Yes—yes: and I believe you," she murmured: then suddenly assuming a serious look, and speaking in a solemn tone, she said, "My dear Douglas, I am about to confide to you a secret which will prove how thoroughly I trust in your honour—how completely I throw myself upon your goodness—and how implicitly I confide in your discretion. But the world says you are giddy—dissipated—reckless ——"

"By heaven! Venetia," exclaimed the Baronet, whose countenance had been rapidly lighting up with the most enthusiastic joy while the lady was speaking,—"think you that I am capable of allowing any act of madness or deed of folly on my part to entail injury upon you? No—by the living God! I could forswear wine—pleasure—recreation—aye, even the most innocent amusement, if I read disapproval in a word or look of thine! Besides, a man must be the basest of the base and the vilest of the vile, who would not do anything—even to the making of the largest sacrifices—in order to merit the confidence of such a being as thou art!"

"Thank you—Oh! thank you, Douglas, for these assurances," said Venetia, in that delicious voice which sank low, deep, and melodious into the very depths of the soul. "And now learn that where I give my confidence I also bestow my love: and this love, then, as well as that confidence I accord unto thee!"

"Oh! it is for me—it is for me to express my thanks—my illimitable gratitude, dearest, dearest Venetia!" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, again seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips: then as she bent towards him, her very look and attitude encouraged him to venture farther still; and snatch-her in his arms, he covered her lips—her cheeks—and her forehead with kisses.

Gently disengaging herself from his embrace after lingering in it a few moments—sufficiently long indeed to convince him that she resented not this liberty which he had taken, and that he might hope in due time for the crowning favours of her love—Venetia said, "I will now impart to thee that great secret which I have promised to reveal:"—then, after a brief pause, during which she reflected profoundly, she said, "Go and unlock the ebon cabinet behind that screen, and bring me forth the jewel case which you will find therein."

Thus speaking, she placed a key in the Baronet's hand; and be at once proceeded to execute her instructions. The lock being low down in the door of the cabinet, he had to stoop even to his knees in order to introduce the key, the screen rendering that nook of the boudoir comparatively dark. But at the very moment that he was thus kneeling down behind the screen, the door of the boudoir was gently opened and the Earl of Curzon made his appearance.

He had performed all the details of his toilette save with respect to putting on his coat,—instead of which he wore an elegant dressing-gown that had been placed in his chamber for his use. Now, had he entered the boudoir properly dressed, there would not have been any impropriety or cause of suspicion in his visit: but the fact of thus introducing himself in a dressing-gown was naturally indicative of a more than ordinary familiarity existing between himself and Venetia.

Such was the thought that instantaneously flashed to her mind as he made his appearance; and she at once, with admirable self-possession, threw her arm over the screen with what to Curzon seemed a mere negligent and unpremeditated gesture, but with a wave of her hand which to Huntingdon behind that screen was a significant intimation that he must remain concealed there. Keeping therefore in his kneeling attitude, so as to continue unseen, the Baronet gently and noiselessly kissed the tips of the fingers that thus hung over that barrier which concealed him;—and this little tender proceeding on his part was meant to convey to Venetia not only an assurance that her hint was understood, but that it should also be obeyed.

At the same moment—for indeed all these little details in the embarrassing episode were the work of only an instant—the Earl of Curzon hastened to throw himself at the feet of Venetia, to whom he was about to pour forth his gratitude for the hours of love he had passed in her arms: but she suddenly checked the flood of language ere even a syllable had time to escape his lips—for, tapping him good-naturedly with her fan, and bending upon him an arch look, she said, "I know you have come to bid me '*good morning*,' before you take your departure homeward; and you are now kneeling at my feet in mock humility——"

"On my honour!" ejaculated the Earl, somewhat surprised at a tone and manner which were rather roguishly jocular than tender and loving as he had expected.

"Not a word, my lord!" she again interrupted him: and with a rapid gesture she pointed towards the door, accompanying the movement with a look suddenly and earnestly significant, as if to warn him that danger was nigh and that he was compromising her. "Yes—I know," she continued, still in that jocular tone which she had previously assumed, "that you are kneeling here to beg pardon for having partaken too generously of my husband's punch. But as I am every moment expecting a visit—from his Royal Highness ——"

The Earl started to his feet: and without uttering a word, he pressed Venetia's hand tenderly—darted upon her a look of mingled tenderness and deep meaning—and then hurried from the room.

An immense weight was now suddenly lifted from Venetia's mind; and she breathed freely once more. Her object was gained—her purpose was won: she had not only prevented the Earl from addressing her in a manner which would betray their amour, but she had likewise kept Huntingdon behind the screen so that he did not observe that Curzon had on the dressing-gown.

"Now you can come forth again, my dear Douglas," she said, starting from her seat and looking gaily and roguishly at him over the screen as he rose to his feet. "To tell you the truth," she continued, "as you were behind the screen at the moment the door opened I thought it best for you to remain there: hence the sudden sign which I made you to keep concealed: for had you come forth as the Earl entered the room, he might have fancied that it was a lover startled from his hiding-place ——"

"And am I not a lover?" asked Sir Douglas Huntingdon tenderly, as he embraced Venetia over the screen: for she gave him those explanations with an air of such artless candour that he did not for an instant suspect her sincerity;—and indeed as he had not observed that the Earl was clad in a dressing gown, he of course saw nothing more in his visit than the interpretation which Venetia had so artfully put upon it at the time—namely, that he had come to bid her "good morning" and apologise with good-humoured gallantry for having committed such a solecism in good manners as to drink too much punch.

"Yes, you are indeed my lover—and a beloved one also," said Venetia, in reply to the Baronet's question. "And now come forth from behind that screen, and bring me the jewel-case."

The Baronet did as he was desired; and Venetia, opening the jewel-box, drew forth the packet of letters tied round with the white riband, and over which we have seen her weeping so bitterly. Unfastening the riband, she selected two or three of the letters and requested Sir Douglas Huntingdon to glance his eye over their contents. He did so:—a quarter of an hour or perhaps twenty minutes were thus absorbed; and while he was perusing those letters, Venetia sate pensive and mournful, watching his countenance.

"Now that you have read those letters," she said, when Sir Douglas laid down the last one which she had given him to peruse, "you have acquired some insight into the character of a being in whose behalf I am about to enlist your services."

Having thus spoken, Venetia took the letters and locked them up in her jewel-box again: then, after a long pause, during which all her thoughts appeared to be held in deep abstraction, she began to address Sir Douglas Huntingdon in a low and solemn tone of confidence.

But what she then said to him—the revelations which she made and the service which she exacted—must remain at present a mystery to our readers: and therefore do we at once drop the curtain upon the scene.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE LAMB AMONGST THE WOLVES-IN-SHEEP'S-CLOTHING.

TURN we now to one of the many handsome apartments of Leveson House: and there we shall find the beautiful Louisa Stanley seated in company with Lady Ernestina Dysart.

Her ladyship was clad in the weeds of widowhood,—the sable garb becoming her admirably, and setting off the whiteness of her polished skin with dazzling effect. She even wore the widow's cap with a certain air of coquettishness—not suffering it to conceal altogether her light brown hair, which now instead of showering in tresses over her shoulders, was arranged in simple bands.

In sweet and innocent contrast with Ernestina, sate the charming and beautiful Louisa Stanley. When describing her in an earlier chapter, we said that her cheeks were not exactly of a rose-colour, but of an animated white, so that without being absolutely pale, they were of the delicate bloom which deepens only through emotion or exercise into the vermeil of the peach. Such was Louisa's complexion *then*—at the time of her first introduction to the reader: but *now*—alas! *now*, it was really and truly pale, the hand of grief having even effaced the health-tint of her youthful bloom! Indeed, it was only necessary to look for a moment into the depths of her blue eyes, to perceive that the remorseless iron of care had penetrated deep, deep into her soul: but in the pensiveness of her mien and the fixity of her desponding gaze, it was also easy to observe that a true Christian fortitude so far attempered and restrained her grief as to prevent it from bursting forth into frenzy or settling down into a blank despair.

It was about mid-day when we find Lady Ernestina Dysart and Louisa Stanley thus seated together in one of the elegantly-furnished drawing-rooms of Leveson House. The damsel had arrived there, in company with the Marquis, on the preceding evening; and she instantaneously became the object of so much kind attention and sisterly regard on the part of Ernestina, that she had already conceived a profound affection for her ladyship. To one of her artless simplicity and unsuspecting character, such a sudden fancy was natural enough; and as she had previously heard from Lord Leveson how his niece Ernestina had very lately lost in so shocking a manner a husband *to whom she was devotedly attached*, Louisa's sympathy was already excited towards the *afflicted* lady before they even met. Indeed, the touching

and pathetic tale which the Marquis had told Louisa upon that subject, was so artfully conceived as to appeal to all the tenderest feelings of the maiden, and thus predisposed her naturally affectionate disposition to entertain a deep liking for Lady Ernestina.

Thus was it that though Louisa Stanley had only been a few hours beneath the same roof with Lord Leveson's niece, the latter had already obtained a strong hold upon the unsuspecting girl and had insinuated herself entirely into her confidence. Therefore, as they now sate together, Ernestina was bending the kindest looks upon Louisa and conversing with her in the softest and tenderest tones—while the maiden felt as if the music of that voice, so full of angelic commiseration and soothing gentleness, flowed like an anodyne into the recesses of her wounded heart.

"My dear young friend," said Lady Ernestina, "you are doubtless most anxious for the return of my uncle——"

"Ah! dear lady," cried Louisa, "can you not understand that I long to fold a beloved sister in my arms—a sister from whom I have been separated for so many months!"

"But I fear that there must be some mistake relative to your sister's address," observed the patrician lady. "However, we shall see in a few minutes: my uncle has been gone nearly an hour—and we may therefore expect his return every moment. Indeed, I wonder what keeps him so long."

"Is Stratton Street far from hence?" inquired Louisa.

"Far!" ejaculated Lady Ernestina. "Oh! no—it is not five minutes' walk; but I had forgotten that this is the first time you ever visited London. When you were giving me that rapid outline of your history this morning, you mentioned the name of Beckford, and observed that your sister was staying with a lady and gentleman of that name——"

"Yes: it is not long that they have removed into Stratton Street," returned Louisa: "they used to live at No. 20, Hanover Square."

"No. 20, Hanover Square!" ejaculated Ernestina, stricken with surprise, and even startled by the mention of an address which instantly conjured up fearful and mysterious associations in her mind: "that is the abode of the Malverns!"

"But have you not in London many streets bearing the same name?" inquired Louisa.

"Yes—to be sure: and there may be several Stratton Streets—but certainly only one at the West End of the town. There may also be another Hanover Square, for anything that I know: but there is assuredly only one of that name in the region of fashion. However, there is no doubt but the Marquis will find out your sister, whatever Stratton Street she may be residing in."

Louisa's lovely countenance brightened up at these words; and with a look did she thank Lady Ernestina for the assurance. A brief pause then ensued in the conversation: for Louisa began to wonder within herself whether Clara would chide her for having so long abandoned their afflicted aunt to the care of a comparative stranger, and for hurrying in the first place to Paris relative to her lover, and now coming up to London expressly to behold and embrace a sister.

On the other hand Lady Ernestina was just thinking how she should enter upon a certain task which her delectable uncle had set her. For every barrier of delicate feeling and pure sentiment was so far broken down between the uncle and niece, that they no longer sought to practise towards each other any concealment of disposition or principles. On the one hand the Marquis knew that his niece had been a very profligate and abandoned demirep, first with a lover of her own choice—then with the Prince into whose arms she was forced: he had seen her so far forget herself as to visit a house of ill-fame in the expectation of meeting a wealthy admirer;—he knew likewise that she had actually been the means of consigning her husband to the scaffold, whereas she might have saved him had she chosen!

On the other hand, Lady Ernestina had experienced positive proof that her uncle employed a procuress—the infamous Mrs. Gale—to entice young females to her house in order to appease his brutal lusts. Moreover, during his absence in Paris, and since the adventure with the Haugman in the treacherous chair, she had penetrated into the gallery of paintings and sculptures, and had thus obtained a deeper—aye, the deepest insight into the hideous sensuality of her uncle's character. Consequently, knowing all these things of each other—and mutually aware too that all these things *were* thus known—it would have been the most absurd of mockeries to maintain any longer the semblance of delicate feeling, propriety, or virtue; and therefore it seemed as if the Marquis, the moment he returned from Paris, was fully prepared to throw off the mask altogether. Such indeed was his intention; and such was the interpretation that Ernestina put upon his conduct, when he whispered the following words in her ear after Louisa had been conducted to her chamber:—"I need not tell you wherefore I have brought this girl hither. She is innocent as a lamb, and artless as a child: it is for you to initiate her in the mysteries of life, so that when I choose to address her in the language of passion, she may not colour with shame, but with desire."

Thus had the Marquis spoken to his niece on the preceding evening, after having consigned Louisa to her care, and just before he went to pay that visit to the Prince at Carlton House which has been mentioned in a preceding chapter. It was a hideous thing for an uncle thus to address a niece—a still more hideous thing that a niece should consent to obey such instructions on the part of an uncle. And it may seem the more dreadful, too, inasmuch as not many weeks had elapsed since that uncle and that niece were sitting shamefaced and weeping in the presence of each other, at the mutual discoveries of frailty and demoralization which were then made. But the instant the mask thus fell from their countenances the barrier of delicacy was speedily annihilated between them;—and moreover, be it observed that in the aristocratic mind the rank weeds of vice and crime spring up, when once they have germinated, with an astonishing rapidity, and speedily bloom in all their poisoned luxuriance in the heated atmosphere of fashionable life.

The brief pause which followed the observations relative to Stratton Street, Hanover Square, and Louisa's sister, was interrupted by Lady Ernestina Dysart observing, "My dear girl, I cannot suffer you to look thus dull and miserable."

"Ah! dear lady," said Louisa, with a profound sigh, "I have so much to render me unhappy!"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing," returned Lady Ernestina, "but the loss of a young man who appears to be utterly unworthy of the love you bestowed upon him."

"Oh! treat not the circumstance so lightly!" exclaimed Louisa, both shocked and amazed at the remark: for all Ernestina's previous allusions to the subject had been expressive of a tender condolence and delicate sympathy.

"Dearest Louisa," cried the artful patrician, "not for a moment did I mean to vex or startle you: but I was merely about to introduce a truth which you yourself will recognise sooner or later—namely, that the self-styled Jocelyn Loftus is not the only handsome, intelligent, and fascinating young gentleman in the world."

"O Lady Ernestina! if a stranger had made that observation to me," exclaimed Louisa, now more painfully surprised and deeply shocked than at first, "I should have regarded it either as an insult or else as a sign of unfeeling thoughtlessness!"

"I am addressing you, my dear young friend," said Ernestina, "as a woman of the world should address a young and inexperienced girl."

"Ah! lady," said Louisa, with a look of angelic frankness,—"never, never shall I obey the dictates of any influence save the natural impulses of my own heart. I have loved Jocelyn tenderly and well: and, Oh! despite his deep, deep criminality, I love him—yes, love him as tenderly and devotedly still! But there is within me, lady, a feeling superior even to that fond and now hopeless love of mine; and this feeling is a sense of duty which tells me that henceforth Jocelyn must ever remain a stranger to me in the world, no matter how fondly his image may be cherished in my heart!"

"This is the way young maidens always talk when disappointed in their first love," said Ernestina, watching Louisa's countenance attentively to see how she took the remark, and whether it would be prudent to venture any farther at present: then perceiving that the damsel became thoughtful, as if weighing the matter seriously in her mind, Ernestina continued to observe, "If you were to remain long with us in London you would soon perceive that what you call *love* performs but a very secondary part in genteel marriages. I will give you an example. It is not two months since the beauty of the fashionable world, Venetia Trelawney, married a very handsome, intelligent, and fascinating young gentleman, named Horace Sackville. Their honeymoon was short indeed; and at its expiration they were suddenly created Lord and Lady Sackville. But that was not all. His lordship was at the same time nominated to a high official situation in the household of the Prince Regent: and accordingly, the newly-married couple gave up their beautiful villa at Knightsbridge and took possession of a suite of apartments in Carlton House. Now Carlton House, my dear Louisa, is the Prince Regent's Palace; and perhaps you may have heard that the Prince Regent himself is a very naughty wicked man, and much too fond of the ladies. But, in plain terms, the reason why Lord and Lady Sackville thus took up their abode at Carlton House, was in order that her ladyship might be under the same roof with the Prince whose *favourite* she has become. Thus, you see, although it is most probable that Lord and Lady Sackville married in the first instance for what is called *love*, they hesitated not to make the sacrifice of that feeling when titles, pensions, and places were offered them. As a matter of course, then, this Venetia of whom I am speaking to you, is the mistress of the Prince——"

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed Louisa, the colour mounting to her cheeks as her pure soul revolted from the narrative the main point of which had only just that instant flashed to her comprehension. "Oh! if such detestable creatures as this Venetia constitute the charm, the glory, and the worship of your *fashionable world of London*, how little do I envy the rich and the great ones of this metropolis! Better, better far is my own humble cottage situated in a retired suburb of Canterbury!—and more welcome to me would prove a chaplet of the roses that bloom in summer over that cottage portico, than the most brilliant coronet glittering upon the brow of your titled lady of the metropolis!"

Ernestina was about to respond to these observations, when the door opened and the Marquis of Leveson entered the room.

"What tidings, my lord?" exclaimed Louisa, springing from her seat and bounding towards him with the most eager curiosity.

"Patience, patience, young lady," answered the nobleman, assuming a playful manner. "Your sister Clara does indeed reside at the address you mentioned in Stratton Street, and also with those worthy people, Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, whom you named."

As the Marquis thus spoke, Lady Ernestina contemplated him with the profoundest astonishment, which was not however observed by Louisa, who was gazing intently upon the nobleman, but with her suspense now relieved by a gradually expanding gleam of pleasure.

"Yes," continued the Marquis, in a tone which seemed candid and frank enough to Louisa, but which nevertheless now satisfied Ernestina that he was practising some artifice upon the maiden,—"yes, my dear girl," he continued, "I am delighted to have ascertained for your sake that there really is no error in your sister's address; but I am sorry to inform you that she is out of town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford for a few days—possibly a week."

"Oh! how unfortunate I am," ejaculated Louisa, a sudden cloud lowering upon her lovely countenance, and the tears starting forth upon her long lashes. "But are they gone far from London?—can I not hasten after them? Oh! I feel convinced that my sister will be so rejoiced to see me——"

"Unfortunately," said the Marquis, "the servants in Stratton Street are not aware whither their master and mistress, together with Miss Stauley, are gone. It is however certain that they will all return home again in a week or ten days——"

"Oh! did I not say that I was unfortunate?" exclaimed Louisa, clasping her hands together and now bursting forth into a flood of tears. "I dare not—must not remain away from Canterbury: I have already deserted my poor afflicted aunt too long! The thought of thus abandoning her fills me with remorse; and therefore I must hasten back home, and postpone the hope of an interview with my sister until some more auspicious occasion."

"You have already admitted, my dear young lady," said the Marquis of Leveson, "that I have

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given you the best possible advice ever since you placed yourself under my paternal guardianship. Now, I beg of you to do nothing precipitately. You know that your aunt is kindly treated by the young lady whom you have left to take care of her; and therefore you would do well to remain here in London until the return of your sister, who, depend upon it would never forgive you if you did not follow my advice in this respect. My house shall be your home; and you know that in me you possess a sincere well-wisher, although our acquaintance has been so short, and although you had likewise heard statements from the lips of Miss Mary Owen prejudicial to my true character."

Artless, unsuspicious, and confiding though the young damsel naturally was, yet there was something in this speech which displeased her. She knew not what it was that thus seemed to grate upon some mysterious chord in her heart—nor could she have pointed out which particular sentence or phrase it was that excited a feeling of uneasiness within her. But certain it was that alarming suspicions suddenly took possession of her mind; and the moment the Marquis endeavoured to impress upon her the conviction of his sincerity, some secret voice appeared to whisper from the depths of her soul that he was deceiving her. The *how* or the *wherefore* did not strike her—nor did she pause to conjecture: for now that the train of her suspicions was once fired, it blazed up with astonishing speed. Back, back to her remembrance came vividly and forcibly a thousand little things which Mary Owen had let drop relative to the Marquis of Leveson: she bethought herself also of a certain peculiar expression which she had frequently noticed in the regards that he fixed upon her when they were in Paris or travelling together; and to her memory returned the singular discourse in which Lady Ernestina Dysart had indulged just previously to her uncle's entrance.

"My lord," she said, endeavouring to veil her fears and therefore her suspicions as well as she was able, "I thank your lordship for all the kindnesses I have experienced at your hand: I thank her ladyship also for the generous sympathy I have received from her during the few hours I have been beneath this roof. But you must not deem me ungrateful for so much hospitality, if I declare at once that I am determined to leave London without delay for Canterbury——"

"Louisa, my dear girl!" exclaimed the Marquis, evidently astounded and almost dismayed by this resolve so decisively expressed,—and, at the same time, there was in his look something so sinister that, unsophisticated as Louisa was, she at once read therein the confirmation of her suspicions: "you cannot think—you must not entertain—no—really," stammered the nobleman,—"I will not permit——"

"My lord, I am determined to hasten home without delay," interrupted Louisa, her courage rising in proportion as her position seemed to become more menacing and dangerous. "It is not yet an hour past noon: perhaps your lordship will allow one of your domestics to order a post-chaise to be in immediate attendance for me?"

"The haste—the precipitation, with which you are thus about to depart, my dear young friend," said Lady Ernestina Dysart, rising from her seat and taking Louisa's hand, "would almost amount to an impeachment upon our hospitality—or indeed a mistrust of our friendship towards you."

"Pray do not deem me ungrateful, nor thus prejudge my motives," said Louisa, with a tell-tale blush upon her cheeks which showed that her thoughts were in reality precisely as Ernestina had interpreted them. "Accept all my thanks—and if you would add to the obligations which you have imposed upon me, then suffer me to depart at once."

And having thus spoken, Louisa hastened to the bell-pull and rang it somewhat violently.

At the same instant the Marquis and his niece exchanged rapid glances, expressive of the conviction that it was useless to try farther argument or persuasion: and then the significant look which the nobleman assumed, made Ernestina aware that his lordship had determined upon strong and coercive measures.

A footman promptly answered Louisa's summons; and in a tone of complete confidence, she said, "Will you be so kind as to order a post-chaise to be immediately procured."

The domestic bowed a respectful assent: but as he raised his eyes again, at the moment of turning to quit the room, he saw Lord Leveson shake his head at him, unperceived however by Louisa,—and the footman accordingly understood that he was *not* to order the post-chaise.

"With your permission," said Louisa to Lady Ernestina, the moment the servant had retired, "I will now ascend to my chamber and prepare for departure."

"I will join you there in a few moments, Louisa," was the reply, "to see whether I can be of service to you, since you are determined to quit us."

Louisa Stanley then left the room; and the moment the door closed behind her, the Marquis addressed himself in hurried and excited terms to his niece.

"Ernestina," he said, "you explained to me this morning how, during my absence in France, a ruffian introduced himself into this house—and how he concealed him-elf in my secret suite of apartments. You likewise confessed to me how you and the Prince proceeded thither, and how you found that burglarious villain held captive in one of my mechanical chairs. You farther told me how this man turned out to be the public executioner—and how the Prince, with a heavy bribe, ensured his services to buoy up Dysart till the very last moment with the hope of a reprieve."

"But wherefore, in the name of heaven! recapitulate all these details?" exclaimed Ernestina, surveying her uncle with astonishment.

"Because," he responded, in a hoarse thick voice, as if the profound concentration of a burning passion was impelling him into extremes at which he trembled and was afraid, and forcing him to hold a language to his own niece at which he was both ashamed and shocked,—"because," he said, "since you have chosen to enter those rooms for your own pleasure, you may now revisit them for mine: and because, since you found seated in one of those chairs a man who afterwards helped to rid you of a detested husband, you may now inveigle into that same chair this young girl on whom I have set my heart."

"But, good heavens!" cried Ernestina, "she is too pure—too innocent!—and this outrage cannot be perpetrated with impunity."

"Do not reason with me," cried her uncle, impetuously. "You see that she is escaping from my toils—she is bent upon leaving us—she evidently suspects something—and it is only by clipping the angel-wings of her innocence that we can prevent this startled dove from flying away!"

"Well, be it as you will," said Ernestina. "You doubtless foresee all the consequences—and I will do as you command. But tell me—one word—what is all this mystery about her sister, these unknown Beckfords, and Stratton Street?"

"Oh! such a mystery indeed—such a secret as I have learnt this day!" exclaimed the Marquis. "But I cannot explain myself now: on another occasion I will tell you all—everything—and then you will indeed be as much astonished as I was. But now hasten and do as I have bid you. Here is the key of the door opening from the Crimson Drawing Room."

Ernestina darted a look of intelligence upon her uncle as she took the key,—a look which told him as plainly as possible that all which depended on herself should be done to facilitate his designs. Then, quitting the apartment where this colloquy had taken place, she repaired first to the Crimson Drawing Room to unlock the door leading into the secret chambers, and then hurried up-stairs to Louisa's room.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE WOLVES THROWING OFF THEIR DISGUISE.

In the meantime Louisa had sought the chamber where she had passed the preceding night; and she immediately began to pack up her trunk for departure. Not for an instant did she suspect that the Marquis of Leveson had dared negative

her orders to fetch the post-chaise: but still she felt that she should breathe more freely when beyond the threshold of this grand aristocratic mansion, the very atmosphere as which seemed heavy, oppressive, and ominous of the dead lull and stifling closeness which pervades the outburst of the storm.

Scarcely had she finished packing her trunk when Lady Ernestina Dysart entered the chamber.

"My dear Louisa," said the artful woman, assuming a look of such well-feigned sorrow that the maiden was completely thrown off her guard thereby, and began to fancy that she had wronged even the Marquis himself by her suspicions,—"my dear Louisa," repeated her ladyship, in the most soothing, endearing, and sympathetic tone, "I am truly vexed that you purpose to leave us thus suddenly: but my uncle desires me to say that he will watch for your sister's return home in company with her kind friends Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, and he will let you know through me when you can come back to London with the certainty of meeting her."

"I am truly grateful," said our heroine, "for this proof of kind consideration on the part of his lordship and yourself:"—but still Louisa spoke with a certain degree of restraint, for she could not give facile utterance to words that came not wholly from her heart.

"Oh! do not thank me for anything which I may do for you," exclaimed Ernestina: "it is a real pleasure to serve so sweet a girl as yourself. And now, my dear Louisa, as it will be a quarter of an hour at least before the post chaise is ready, I have ordered refreshments to be served up in my own chamber: and thither must you accompany me, so that we may have a few minutes' *tête-à-tête* before you leave."

This proposal was made with so much friendly candour and winning affability, that Louisa did not hesitate to accept it. Lady Ernestina accordingly led the way first into the Crimson Drawing Room, and thence into the adjoining apartment, the elegance of which naturally excited Louisa's admiration, notwithstanding the claims which other and far more serious matters had upon her thoughts. But her patrician guide did not allow her much leisure to contemplate this room, with its luxurious sofas ranged all round the walls, its splendid porcelain vases exhaling delicious perfumes, and its exquisitely chased silver lamp suspended to the ceiling. Opening the door at the farther extremity, Ernestina conducted the maiden into the next room, where, as the reader will remember, the carpet was the thickest ever trodden upon, and where the arm-chairs were the most massive ever seen,—provided too with cushions of corresponding proportions.

"This is the ante-room to my own chamber," said the false-speaking and evil-intentioned Ernestina; "and I ordered the refreshments to be served up here. I suppose the footman must have misunderstood me," she continued, assuming a tone of vexation. "Sit down, my dear girl," she added, affably pointing to a chair: "and I will ring the bell for luncheon."

Louisa unhesitatingly proceeded to place herself where the treacherous lady thus pointed: but scarcely had the young virgin's form made its imprint upon the flocculent cushion, when the sudden click of the secret mechanism was heard, and she found herself strangely but alarmingly held captive by means of the springs that clasped her wrists and the steel bands that fastened their gripe upon her shoulders.

The terror of consternation for a few moments sealed her lips: but as she beheld Lady Ernestina suddenly disappear through a door which opened in the wall exactly facing the treacherous chair, the unfortunate girl saw indeed too well that she was betrayed, and a piercing scream burst from her lips. But almost immediately after Ernestina had flitted away so abruptly, and while that rending scream was still vibrating through the suite of rooms, the Marquis of Leveson stood before his intended victim!

He had entered by that same door through which his niece had fled; and closing it behind him, he at once said, in a low but earnest tone, "Louisa, your cries are unavailing: no mortal ear do they reach beyond the four walls of this room;—and therefore I need scarcely observe that you are in my power!"

"My lord, my lord," faltered the maiden, in a dying tone, while her brain grew dizzy and a film came over her eyes "take pity upon the friendless orphan who never injured you!"

"O Louisa!" exclaimed the Marquis, fixing upon her those satyr eyes that were burning with desire—"to ask mercy for yourself is to tell *me* to make an impossible sacrifice! Listen to me, dear girl—do not despair—do not give way to grief—do not look thus wildly, thus vaguely upon me! You know that I bear one of the loftiest and proudest titles in England—that my riches are immense: you have seen enough of this mansion here to know that it is spacious and magnificent;—and I may add that in the loveliest spots of England there are country-seats—perfect paradises in themselves—of which I am also the possessor. Of this lofty title, then will I make thee the sharer—of this wealth will I make thee the mistress: my mansions, my domains, my rural villas—all shall be thine, Louisa, if thou wilt give me thy love!"

Our heroine heard the tones of the nobleman's voice, but comprehended not what he said. There was a hurry in her brain that made her thoughts a whirlwind and threw her senses into confusion. All she knew was that some tremendous danger menaced her, and that she was sinking beneath the weight of an ineffable consternation.

The Marquis saw that she was thus overwhelmed—that her head was drooping—and that her senses were slowly abandoning her; and he thought within himself, "I will not excite nor arouse her—I will let her sink into insensibility—and then——"

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The instant Lady Ernestina Dysart had performed her treacherous part towards poor Louisa Stanley, she disappeared from the presence of the outraged maiden in the manner already described. The reader will have comprehended that she touched the secret spring and opened the invisible door communicating with her uncle's room, where indeed his lordship had been awaiting the issue of the adventure.

Hastily telling him that the deed was done, Ernestina traversed the bed-chamber and hurried into the Crimson Drawing Room, where she threw herself upon a soft, palpitating with excitement. For bad, depraved, and unprincipled though she was, she neverthless felt shocked and frightened

in the presence of this tremendous iniquity to which she had lent herself.

Not many moments, however, did she thus give way to her painful reflections, ere she was startled by the entrance of a footman, saying, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon requests an immediate interview with either my Lord Marquis or your ladyship."

Ernestina was about to desire the domestic to say that neither she nor her uncle was at home, when the Baronet, who had followed close behind the footman, now walked unceremoniously into the room.

The lacquey accordingly retired: and this singular behaviour on the part of Huntingdon so increased, or indeed so completely crowned Ernestina's agitation that, all woman of the world though she was, she felt covered with confusion.

"Pardon this intrusion, my lady," said Huntingdon, who spoke in the tone and with the air of a man bent upon the performance of some decisive part: "but I must see the Marquis immediately."

"My uncle is particularly engaged," faltered Lady Ernestina, a deep blush suffusing her cheeks and running up even unto her forehead, so that it was lost beneath the massive bands of her light brown hair.

"If I cannot see the Marquis, then," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately, "your ladyship will perhaps have the kindness to afford me an interview with Miss Louisa Stanley, who is now staying at Leveson House."

Ernestina gave a visible start as this demand smote her ears: and with the instinctive impulse of a guilty conscience, she cast her eyes rapidly towards the door communicating with the private suite of apartments.

Sir Douglas, who was keenly alive to every look or gesture on the part of the lady, and who saw in her increasing confusion something calculated to excite the most alarming suspicions, failed not to observe that glance which she involuntarily flung towards the door. He was no stranger to the existence of that suite of apartments: as one of the most intimate friends of Lord Leveson, all the treacherous or licentious mysteries thereof were well known to him;—and it was therefore natural that he should now suddenly argue the very worst. He had been told that Leveson was particularly engaged—his visit had evidently overwhelmed Lady Ernestina with confusion and dismay—and that tell-tale look which she had flung at the door of the private chambers, at once seemed to afford a clue to all that was passing.

"Ah! I understand," exclaimed the Baronet: "my friend the Marquis is in those rooms—and as I am no stranger to the mysteries of his mansion, I will, with your ladyship's permission, at once seek him there."

As he thus spoke, Sir Douglas Huntingdon hastened towards the door of the private apartments: but Lady Ernestina sprang after him and caught him by the arm, exclaiming, "No, sir—you must not intrude upon my uncle's privacy!"

"I am well aware, as a matter of course," said Huntingdon, "that my behaviour may seem somewhat extraordinary; but it will be your ladyship's fault if it now merge into downright rudeness."

"Rudeness! what do you mean, sir?" ejaculated Ernestina, a deeper crimson than before suffusing her face, and her eyes flashing angrily: "you surely, as a gentleman, are incapable of rudeness towards *me*, a lady?"

"Then, as a lady," cried the Baronet, in a stern and even imperious tone such as perhaps he had never used in his life before,—"conduct yourself like a lady, and depend upon it I should never dream of treating you otherwise."

"Again I demand of you, sir, what you mean by this insulting observation?" cried Ernestina, now labouring under a terrible excitement.

"I mean," responded the Baronet, with a significance of look and a determination of manner that made her quail and recoil in dismay,—"I mean that if you prevent me from entering those rooms, I shall suspect that you are acquainted with all the mysteries which they contain; and this will not be highly creditable to you! Moreover, if I discover that anything outrageous or vile is now passing in those rooms, I shall be justified in setting *you* down as the accessory and the accomplice."

Ernestina fell crushed and annihilated upon a chair, burying her face in her hands: for it appeared to her as if her whole heart was suddenly laid bare in its boundless depravity to the view of that man who addressed her in a tone of such haughty confidence, stern remonstrance, and terrible menace.

The Baronet, having thus silenced and subdued that lady whose complicity in her uncle's licentious proceedings was now too evident, lost no time in opening the door leading into the secret apartments, and which Ernestina had ere now left unlocked after conducting Louisa thither.

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Meantime the Marquis of Leveson, perceiving that Louisa Stanley was rapidly losing her consciousness, and that she was indeed fainting in that chair which so treacherously held her captive, stood for a few moments gloating upon the charms of which he hoped so soon to become the master. Her head hung down upon her bosom, of which his lustful eyes caught a slight glimpse; and the bands, clasping her shoulders, held her back in such a manner that though her charming head thus drooped like a flower on its tall slender stalk, yet her form was retained upright in the chair. Therefore his gaze could slowly wander over the graceful symmetry and virgin contours of that exquisite shape,—a shape that possessed all the light and airy elegance of the sylph, with just sufficient fulness to denote that the last stage of girlhood was bursting into the luxuriant bloom and ripeness of womanhood.

But just at the moment when the Marquis of Leveson fancied that our heroine was sinking into a profound insensibility, and while all his detestable passions were boiling up to a frenzied degree at what appeared to be the close consummation of his diabolical project,—just at the instant, in fact, that he believed himself to be touching on his crowning infamy,—Louisa appeared to be startled suddenly back to full consciousness.

Raising her head, she gazed for a moment—a single moment—wildly around her: then, all the tremendous truth flashing to her recollection and all the incidents of her position recurring vividly to her comprehension, she gave vent to another loud, long, and piercing scream.

"Foolish girl! I have told thee that thy cries are vain," said the Marquis, going straight up to her and looking her full in the face. "Will you be mine, I say, voluntarily?—will you yield of your own accord, and accept my hand—my fortune—my title——"

But scream upon scream thrilled from the maiden's lips; and the Marquis, stamping his foot with rage, was bursting forth into violent threats—when suddenly the door between this and the first room of the suite was thrown violently open, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon sprang into the presence of the startled nobleman and his intended victim.

"Release this young lady immediately," exclaimed the Baronet, laying his hand upon the collar of the Marquis.

"What! *you*, Huntingdon, thus to interfere with the pursuits of an old friend?" faltered Leveson, not knowing what to think of the intrusion.

"Let us not bandy words," said the Baronet, sternly: "you see that I am resolute! Come—I understand not precisely the mechanism of this chair—but I command you to release Miss Louisa Stanley forthwith!"

The nobleman saw that Huntingdon was not only in earnest, but also fully bent upon the deliverance of the maiden: and accordingly, with a hand trembling as if suddenly palsied, the Marquis touched the spring which instantaneously released our heroine from her captivity.

Falling at the feet of Sir Douglas Huntingdon in the enthusiasm of her joy at this sudden and providential liberation, Louisa took his hand and pressed it with all the fervour of her young heart's gratitude. The Baronet hastened to raise her; and fixing his eyes upon the Marquis, who stood by pale and trembling with rage, he said, "Nothing of all this shall be known if you permit Miss Louisa Stanley to depart from your house without any farther attempt at molestation. But if a finger be raised to impede her passage, I will adopt any measure—no matter how much calculated to expose you——"

"Retire then—go—depart," faltered the Marquis, with a strong effort to subdue the violence of his passion: "but I beseech—I implore Miss Louisa Stanley not to betray me—and above all things not to breathe a word to the ruin of my niece!"

Our heroine's heart was too full of joy at her happy deliverance to allow her tongue to utter a word: but Sir Douglas Huntingdon said emphatically, "I promise you, Leveson, on my honour as a gentleman, that nothing of all this shall be revealed elsewhere."

Having thus spoken, the Baronet hastily conducted Louisa Stanley into the Crimson Drawing Room,—closing behind them the doors through which they passed. Lady Ernestina was no longer there: she had retired in shame, terror, and grief, to her own apartment, leaving the perplexing and menacing adventure to take its own course.

"Miss Stanley," the Baronet now said, the moment they were together in the Crimson Drawing Room; "have the goodness to read this note."

The damsel instantaneously took the billet which was presented to her; and an ejaculation of joy fell from her lips as she recognised her sister's handwriting. Tearing open the note, she read the following words:—

"13, STRATTON STREET.
"*Nov. 16th*, 1814.

"The bearer of this, my ever dear Louisa, is a gentleman in whom you may confide. He will take you away from a place where you are surrounded by manifold dangers, and will bring you at once to me.

"Your affectionate sister,
"CLARA."

Words are incapable of describing the delight and happiness which now sprang up in Louisa's bosom, even to the absorption for the time being of her grief on account of her lover's presumed infidelity.

"Then my sister—my beloved sister—is indeed in town," she exclaimed; "and the Marquis deceived me!"

"No, Miss Stanley—he did not altogether deceive you," answered the Baronet: "for if he had not called in Stratton Street ere now, your sister could not of course have known that you were at Leveson House or even in London at all. But the truth is this—your sister was indeed absent from town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford; but she came back suddenly and alone, in order to execute some little commission for Mrs. Beckford. She arrived in Stratton Street only a few minutes after the Marquis had left. Knowing his evil reputation, she was shocked and horrified at the idea of her sister being beneath his roof; and as I happened to call at the moment, she besought me to come with this note which you have just read. My carriage is at the door; and so soon as you are ready, I shall have much pleasure in escorting you to Stratton Street."

Louisa hastened up-stairs for her bonnet and scarf, with which she speedily returned to the Crimson Drawing Room, well pleased at encountering neither the Marquis nor Lady Ernestina upon the stairs. Having rung the bell, she ordered the footman who answered the summons to have her trunk taken down to the Baronet's carriage, which was waiting at the door: and when, in a few minutes, the domestic announced that her commands had been executed, she accompanied Sir Douglas Huntingdon from Leveson House.

And now who can describe the feelings of this young, beautiful, and artless girl as she took her seat in the vehicle which was to convey her to that sister from whom she had been separated for five long months? Yet while rolling along in the handsome equipage, she did not forget to renew her thanks to Sir Douglas Huntingdon for the immense service which he had rendered her: but he assured the charming girl that he was only too happy in having arrived at Leveson House so seasonably as to rescue her from the peril in which the darkest and deepest treachery had placed her. Indeed, to tell the truth, as Sir Douglas Huntingdon contemplated with respectful admiration the lovely damsel by his side, he could not help thinking that there was even in the world a pleasure more genuine and more sweet than to triumph over innocence,—namely, to rescue it from impending ruin!

But neither the Baronet nor Louisa had many minutes for reflection or conversation, inasmuch as the carriage soon dashed up to the door of a handsome house in Stratton Street; and looking forth from the window of the vehicle, our heroine

beheld the countenance of her sister at one of the casements of the drawing-room.

In another minute Louisa was clasped—firmly, fondly clasped—in the embrace of that affectionate sister: and not only their kisses, but also their tears were mingled!

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE SISTERS.

The drawing-room where the sisters thus met, was very handsomely furnished, and bore all the evidences of a refined female taste. It was the same room where Jocelyn Loftus had seen Clara Stanley on the occasion of his visit to London, and where she had given her approval of his suit in respect to Louisa.

The sisters were now alone together;—for Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not followed our heroine up into that room, but remained in an apartment below. When the first effusion of joy was over, and the first transports of delight at this meeting were somewhat subsided, Clara and Louisa sate down side by side upon the sofa, and began to contemplate each other with the deepest, tenderest interest.

On the one hand, Clara beheld her younger sister beautiful as ever, and with all that ineffable sweetness of look and innocence of mien which indicated the stainless purity of her soul: she saw her, too, at great advantage—for the pallor and the pensiveness previously occasioned by Jocelyn's supposed perfidy, had now yielded to the roseate tinge of joy and the brightness of look which reflected the heart's holiest satisfaction. Clara therefore beheld her sister lovely and loveable as she was when they parted,—one of the chastest and most charming ornaments which the sex ever bestowed upon this world—an incarnation of all the sweetest, truest, and most ethereal attributes which piety or poesy ascribes unto angels!

On the other hand, Louisa beheld her sister more grandly beautiful, more superbly handsome than when they parted under the rose-covered portico of their Kentish cottage. She saw in Clara a magnificent woman the glory of whose charms seemed to have expanded into a finer and more dazzling bloom in the hot-house of London fashion. Nor less did it strike Louisa that everything at all girlish which might have lingered in the manners or looks of Clara some months back, had now totally departed. The finest gloss of courtly elegance seemed to rest upon her like a charm and hang about her like a spell: there was a grandeur in every movement—a brilliancy in every gesture, softened and subdued only by the polish of an exquisite refinement, and more so by the tenderness of feeling which she now experienced at this meeting with her sister. In a word, our fair young heroine, although she had ever been accustomed to look up to Clara as an elder sister, now regarded her with the deference that mingles in the affection which a daughter experiences for a mother. For Louisa still felt herself a mere girl; whereas Clara looked in every respect, not only the brilliant woman, but also the great lady. Thus Louisa, with her nineteen years and a half, felt as if she were a miss of fifteen or sixteen in the presence of this elder sister,—who, though only twenty-one and a half, possessed all the worldly demeanour as well as the luxuriance of charms which characterise the superb matron of at least five or six years older.

Such were the impressions respectively made by this meeting of the sisters; and when they had gazed long and with earnest fondness upon each other, Louisa suddenly exclaimed, "O Clara! are you angry with me for having abandoned my home—for having gone to Paris—and now for having come up to London?"

"Do not talk of anger, dearest girl," said Clara, "while our hearts are yet throbbing with all the first transports of joy at this meeting. Angry with you, dearest Louisa! No, no—it were impossible! Not for worlds would I bring a tear into your eyes or change into gloom those smiles which now gleam so sweetly upon your lips! Ah! dearest Louisa, it is as if I were thy mother instead of thy sister that I am now talking to thee: and it is with such a feeling that I rejoice—Oh! I rejoice unfeignedly, to be enabled to pour balm into thy wounded heart!"

"Oh! dearest Clara," interrupted Louisa, surveying her sister with mingled amazement and suspense,—"to what do you allude? Alas! you cannot as yet know my sorrows; because, when I sate down in Paris to commit them to paper and send you an account of all that had occurred, the pen dropped from my hands! Yes—vainly did I commence letter after letter: each fresh attempt only rendered my heart's-wounds more painful—it was like pouring molten lead upon the seared and lacerated flesh! Pardon me, therefore, dear sister, for having thus preserved a silence which may seem unkind—nay, even improper——"

"Enough—enough! dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, throwing her arms round her young sister's neck and drawing down that innocent head until it reposed upon her bosom: "from your lips I need no apology—no excuse,—especially as I am well acquainted with much that has occurred. And to keep you no longer in suspense, let me assure you that Jocelyn is innocent!"

"Innocent!" echoed Louisa, her own sweet lips thus repeating in ecstatic joy an assurance which other sweet lips had just breathed in tenderness: "innocent!" she repeated, raising her head suddenly from her sister's bosom, her looks beaming and glittering with mingled joy, hope, and suspense. "Oh! if this were true—if this were true!"—and she clasped her hands with a gesture expressive of ineffable emotions.

"It is as I assure you, my beloved sister," rejoined Clara Stanley. "I would not deceive you for a moment in such a case: no—not for worlds would I deceive you where your heart's best and purest affections are engaged."

"Oh! this is happiness—this is happiness indeed!" murmured Louisa: and flinging herself into her sister's arms, she wept tears of love, and gratitude, and joy, upon her bosom.

"Dear Louisa, this is the sweetest moment that I have experienced for months past," murmured Clara, in a voice that was tremulous and low.

And then *she* also wept: but we cannot say whether the tears that now streamed down her cheeks, welled forth from feelings as unalloyed with pain and as unmixed with self-reproach as those

which her sister experienced - that fair, bright, and innocent sister whose tears were moistening Clara's heaving breast with their crystal purity!

"And are you sure—very sure of all this, dearest Clara?" inquired Louisa, again raising her head and bending upon her sister a countenance beaming with smiles of innocence and delight. "But, Oh! yes—I see that you are confident, and I will not ask you to repeat your assurance!"

"Rely upon what I say, dearest Louisa," answered Clara. "If I were not thus confident upon the subject, I would not for a moment venture the assertion: if a doubt existed in my mind, I would rather have left you in the belief of your lover's infidelity, than encourage a hope which after all might turn out to be delusive! Not only is your lover innocent, dearest Louisa—but he is one of the most injured and persecuted of men in all that concerns his imprisonment in the Prefecture of Police, and one of the most virtuous and honorable of young men in all that regards his fidelity towards you and the temptations to which he has been subjected."

"O Jocelyn, Jocelyn! to think that I should have mistrusted thee so profoundly!—to think that I should have wronged thee so immensely!' murmured Louisa, shaking her head in despair. "And yet heaven knows that the circumstantial evidence which told against thee, Jocelyn, was to all appearances crushing and overwhelming! For did not the Prefect himself assure me of dreadful things?—did I not behold with my own eyes a scene too well calculated to make me mistrust thee?—did I not even hear that female's voice proclaim her love for thee?"

"Ah! now, my dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, "you are torturing yourself with misgivings, in spite of the certainties which I have breathed in your ears. It is true that I am not acquainted with all the minute details of these matters to which you are alluding: but in general terms I can assure you that your lover is innocent—that he is even of the most rigid virtue—that his purity is incorruptible—and that whatever complexion circumstantial evidence may have been made to assume against him, he will be enabled to clear up every thing!"

"But one word more, Clara," exclaimed Louisa: "one word more—and then farewell to all misgivings! Is he really living under a false name?"

"Yes—that most assuredly he is," exclaimed the elder sister; "and to his honour and credit is this very fact which has been made not only the cause of his arrest, but also one of the grounds of his reproach. But I shall leave to *him*, Louisa, when the time comes, the duty of explaining to you wherefore he has assumed this name of *Jocelyn Loftus* and what his real name is. For I feel assured that these revelations will flow more sweetly upon your ears and sink down more deliciously into your heart, when coming from the lips of a lover, even than from those of a fond and affectionate sister. And now one word more relative to Jocelyn, as we must still continue to call him——"

"Oh! what else have you to say upon this subject?" asked Louisa with renewed suspense.

"That in a short time—a very short time, I hope—he will be free," returned Clara. "Indeed, I am *convinced* that he will soon be liberated: and then, dear girl, he will no doubt rejoice to give you all those explanations which must triumphantly prove his own innocence and dispel all the misgivings that still perhaps lurk in the depths of your soul!"

"He will be free—O heavens! that there may be no disappointment or delay in the fulfilment of this hope!" exclaimed Louisa, once more clasping her hands and now gazing upward with a fervid enthusiasm, so that it was easy to perceive that in the depths of her soul she prayed to heaven to verify her sister's assurance.

"Whatever I tell you, dearest Louisa, you may rely upon," rejoined Clara. "And now that I have relieved you from so much anxiety and changed your sorrow into heartfelt joy, you must give me all the particulars of what has occurred to you relative to that journey to Paris and this visit to London."

"I will tell you everything, dear sister," answered the young maiden. "You are well aware, from the letters which I have so constantly written to you, that in the month of September Jocelyn brought Miss Mary Owen with him from London and desired that she might find a home at the cottage?"

"Yes—while he proceeded to the Continent," said Clara, taking up the thread of her sister's discourse, "in order to defeat certain machinations which had been devised against the Princess of Wales, and in which the Owen family was concerned. On all these points your letters were explicit enough."

"And I also told you," continued Louisa, "that Jocelyn wrote to me a letter full of love and tenderness from the French capital, stating how he had arrived there in due course and how he had fallen in with Mary's three sisters at Calais whom he had escorted to Paris. I answered his welcome epistle; and he wrote to me another as affectionate as the first. But that was the last letter which I received from him: and then his correspondence suddenly ceased. This was at the end of September."

"And throughout the month of October,' observed Clara, "your letters to me were mournful indeed. You seemed to fancy that your lover had altogether abandoned you——"

"No, no—dearest Clara," exclaimed Louisa, blushing. "I did not *then* suspect his fidelity: but I was afraid—indeed, I was haunted with the idea, that some terrible calamity had overtaken him——"

"Well, and did I not send you all the consolation in my power?" asked Clara: "did I not conjure you to cherish hope and avoid despair?—although at the time heaven knows that I was utterly ignorant of what had really become of your lover!"

"Had it not been for your soothing and consolatory letters," said Louisa, "I should have become delirious with anguish, or else have been plunged into a blank despair. Well, in this manner did the month of October pass mournfully on: and just as it was drawing to a close, I received a letter, dated from Paris, and stating that it was of the highest consequence to me to repair thither without delay in order to learn certain calamitous truths relative to Jocelyn Loftus. That letter, which bore the signature of '*An Unknown Friend*,' desired me to proceed at once to the British Con-

sul on my arrival in Paris, and he would give me farther information. Conceive, my dear Clara, the state of mind into which this letter threw me: and, Oh! *you* were not nigh to counsel me! I felt that it was wrong to leave our poor aunt to the care of a comparative stranger: but on the other hand it would have been madness or perhaps death for me to have remained at home, a prey to the most excruciating suspense!"

"Poor girl!" said the elder sister, hastily wiping her eyes. "No—I was not there to succour you with my advice, although I ought to have been! But go on, Louisa—go on," she repeated, with a sort of nervous impatience. "I can understand full well how it was that you yielded to the impulse of your feelings and resolved upon repairing to Paris. Under the circumstances I should have done the same: and therefore I do not blame you."

"Thank you, dear sister—thank you for that assurance!" exclaimed Louisa, smiling through the tears which had started forth upon her lashes as she spoke of her aunt. "Yes—it is as you have said! Driven wild with fearful misgivings—half frenzied and delirious—hurried along as it were by an overwhelming torrent of feeling, I became powerless for anything like calm deliberation. Mary Owen promised to bestow the most unwearied attention upon my aunt, and to take my place in all tender ministrations towards her. I knew that my young friend was kind-hearted, affectionate, and sincere; and I entertained not the slightest apprehension that our afflicted relation would experience neglect at her hands. Thus, after a few very brief preparations, my departure was taken hurriedly; and without any adventure worth relating, I arrived safely in Paris. Immediately on reaching the French capital, I repaired to the British Consul: and when I mentioned my name, he treated me with a kindness of manner so fully reassuring and even paternal that I was struck with the idea that he himself must be the author of the letter which was signed by *an unknown friend.* But in this respect I was speedily undeceived; for, after a few observations to the purport that an excellent and kind hearted English nobleman was really the author of that letter, and was interesting himself in my behalf, the consul directed me to an hotel close at hand, where I was to inquire for the *Marquis of Leveson.* You may well understand, my dear Clara, that the moment this name struck upon my ears, it carried a vague and unknown terror into the depths of my soul: for although I had heard but little of this nobleman from the lips of Mary Owen, yet this little was not in his favour."

Here we must pause for a moment to remind our reader that when Jocelyn had introduced Mary Owen to the cottage at Canterbury, he had carefully forborne from mentioning to Louisa anything beyond the mere outline of the atrocious conspiracy that was a-foot against the Princess of Wales. Especially did he avoid alluding to the infamous means which had been adopted to demoralize the minds of the fair daughters of Mrs. Owen: and Mary herself, with a proper feeling of delicacy, never subsequently enlightened Louisa in that respect. Thus the reader will understand that when Louisa heard the name of the Marquis of Leveson mentioned by the British Consul, she knew nothing of the *worst phases* of his character, but only that he was one of the Prince Regent's confederates in respect to the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales. These circumstances being duly borne in mind, it will be the more easy to comprehend the ensuing details of Louisa Stanley's narrative.

"Yes—on hearing that name of *Leveson,*" she continued, after a brief pause, "I felt that it was indeed probable he might know something of Jocelyn and of Jocelyn's proceeding, since his lordship was so intimately connected with the machinations and designs of the Prince and so well acquainted with the Misses Owen. Therefore, after thanking the British Consul for his kindness, I at once repaired to the hotel which he had named; and on inquiring for the Marquis of Leveson, I was introduced to his presence. If you have ever seen him, Clara ——"

"Yes—I—I think I must have seen him," observed the elder sister, with a slight appearance of confusion. "But go on. What were you about to say?"

"I was on the point of observing that his lordship is an elderly, if not an old man," continued Louisa; "and his age, added to the paternal kindness with which he received me, naturally inspired me with confidence. Besides, I was too anxious to be relieved of my dreadful suspense relative to Jocelyn, to give way to much misgiving on my own account; and as he doubtless saw by my looks how torturing that suspense was, he at once entered on the painful topic alluded to in his pseudonymous letter. After a suitable preface, he proceeded with every appearance of gentleness and considerate caution, to unfold a long tale of charges and accusations against poor Jocelyn. Thus at his very first words I was so far relieved as to learn that the object of my affections had neither sustained personal injury nor was dead,—between which calamities my frenzied fancy had been cruelly alternating. But, Oh! if I were indeed relieved from that poignant suspense and excruciating alarm, it was only to hear sufficient to prove, as I then thought, that henceforth Jocelyn was unworthy of the love which I had bestowed upon him! Nevertheless, I could not—I would not—I dared not—put implicit faith in the bare word of the Marquis of Leveson, without corroboration and without proof. Nor did he for a moment appear to believe that I should rest satisfied with mere statements unsupported by evidence. He assured me that his only aim was to save me from becoming the victim of an adventurer, and that his conduct towards me was inspired by the feelings which a father might cherish towards a daughter. In a word, my dear Clara, he spoke so kindly, so reasonably, and so conscientiously to all appearance—and then, too, I was so very, very unhappy, so lonely, and so much in want of a friend and adviser—that I readily promised to be guided by his counsel. He bade me remain at the hotel, assigning me to the care of the landlady and her daughters, who were worthy people, and seeing that I was unhappy, did their best to console me in my affliction. To be brief, the Marquis took me late that same night in his carriage to the Prefecture of Police: and there, as it appeared to me, I received the fullest, the cruellest, and, Oh! the most fatal confirmation of all that his lordship had previously told me!"

Louisa Stanley now related to her sister the

details of all that she had heard or seen at the Prefecture of Police, and which are already well known to the reader.

"My dearest girl," said Clara, "I have already told you that your intended husband does really bear a false name, but that he has assumed it through no dishonourable motives. Therefore, the entry in the Prefect's Black Book is virtually nothing more nor less than a record of a base pretext for a most arbitrary arrest. That the Prefect should have repeated to you the calumnies previously levelled against Jocelyn by the Marquis of Leveson, can be explained either by supposing the French functionary to be as vile as the English nobleman himself, or else to have been easily misled and deceived by that nobleman. Then, with regard to the third incident which appeared to you a corroborative proof of Jocelyn's perfidy —namely, the occurrences of the prison-chambers, —all this doubtless arose from circumstances purposely arranged and cunningly combined at a special moment to produce particular effects. There was an aperture, you say, in the wall between two chambers, and you were led to believe that this aperture had been formed as a means of communication and intercourse between Jocelyn and the female captive who was his neighbour. But, Ah! Louisa, did you pause to ascertain that Jocelyn was a guilty wretch instead of a victim—the creator of the circumstances in which you found him placed, or the victim of them? In fine, had he invited that female to his chamber?—or had she forced herself upon him? You tell me that when you heard him speak within that second chamber whence the light streamed through the aperture, his words were an ejaculation to the effect *that he should be driven mad.* But was that the cry of love or of despair?—was that the language of a passion traitorous to *you*, or of a bitter persecution endured by *himself?* And then, that response

from the female to the effect *that she loved him and that he knew she thus loved him,*—might it not have been addressed to him as a reproach and a remonstrance for coldness, aversion, or inaccessibility on his part? Depend upon it, Louisa, as I ere now said, Jocelyn will give, when you meet again, the fullest and most satisfactory explanations upon all these points."

"Yes, dearest Clara," answered Louisa, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "I indeed see all those incidents in a new light. But what could I think of them at the time? Oh! I was stricken down as if the hand of death had suddenly been laid upon me: I was borne away from the spot—and for several days I remained in a state of delirium at the hotel. But the kindest attentions were shown me by the landlady, her daughters, and the medical attendant: and thus, when my mind began to emerge from the wild confusion of its ideas, I found myself the object of the tenderest solace and sympathy. I wished to hasten back to England—to return home: but the Marquis represented to me the impossibility of my travelling in the nervous and excited condition that I then was; and this representation was warmly seconded by the worthy females to whose care I was assigned. Weak as I was in body and attenuated as I felt in mind, I was over-persuaded without much difficulty. And I have already told you, Clara, how vain were the attempts I made to commit my woes to paper and correspond with you! Thus did day after day pass: and all this while the conduct of the Marquis was so kind, so respectful, and at the same time so fatherly, that I felt assured his character must either have been mistaken or unjustly treated by Mary Owen. To be brief, I experienced the deepest gratitude towards his lordship: I felt that I was indebted to him for being rescued from the snares and influences of an adventurer. But, Oh! while thus I thought in a strain so depreciatory of poor Jocelyn, the scalding tears flowed down my cheeks and I felt as if my heart would burst! It was a relief for me to quit Paris—that place which appeared to be the scene of the fatal rock on which all my fondest hopes were shipwrecked! The Marquis, with a delicacy which entirely confirmed the good opinion I had recently been forming of him, arranged that the landlady's eldest daughter should accompany us as far as Dover, so that I might not be left without female society during the journey. On arriving at Dover, this young Frenchwoman left us to return to Paris, liberally rewarded by the Marquis. Up to this moment, Clara, the idea of proceeding to London had never entered my mind. But as I was journeying with the Marquis from Dover to Canterbury, he represented to me the propriety and even the necessity of consulting my sister—yourself, beloved Clara—and pouring my sorrows into her bosom after all that had occurred. Ah! need I tell you—need I assure you that it required but little argument to persuade me in the adoption of this course? I nevertheless insisted upon halting at Canterbury to assure myself that our afflicted aunt was properly cared for. '*Mary Owen,*' then said the Marquis, '*is deeply prejudiced against me, and fancies that I am engaged in a conspiracy which has no other existence than in her own imagination. She will therefore believe, if you tell her you are travelling with me, that I shall snatch her away from her present retreat and bear her back to her mother. But as I do not wish to interfere with the poor girl, it will be needless for you to create any alarm in her mind. Would it not then be prudent to forbear from mentioning my name to her at all?*'—I yielded to these representations, which appeared to me so natural at the moment;—and besides, my mind was so attenuated that I really had neither the courage nor the power to think for myself, and was therefore easily led to follow any advice that was given to me at the moment by one whom I deemed a friend. I went to the cottage: I learnt privately from the faithful servant-girl that Mary Owen had filled my place with the utmost tenderness towards my afflicted aunt:—and Mary Owen herself gave me the assurance that she had neglected nothing in the fulfilment of the duty entrusted to her. Few and rapid were the words that passed between us. I told her that Jocelyn was faithless to me, and a mere adventurer in society. I told her also that her sisters had proceeded to join the Princess of Wales in Italy: and I assured her that I had the best possible means for believing that the conspiracy against that august lady had in reality no actual existence. Mary Owen was astonished at this declaration on my part: she shook her head gloomily—but evidently was at a loss what to think. I told her to suspend all opinion until my return from London, when I would enter into the fullest and minutest details. Then, after this flying visit to the cottage—a visit which lasted for a brief half-hour—I returned to the *Fountain Hotel* where the Marquis of Leveson's carriage had stopped. Our journey was then pursued towards London, where we arrived last evening."

Louisa Stanley now proceeded to relate the treatment she had experienced at Leveson House—how the Marquis and Ernestina had suddenly thrown off the mask, and how the seasonable and sudden arrival of Sir Douglas Huntingdon had saved her from the treachery and outrage which the profligate nobleman had dared to contemplate. The elder sister was more than indignant—she was positively enraged at hearing this recital of the crowning dangers through which Louisa had that morning passed; and she murmured to herself, "Lord Leveson shall repent of this black atrocity!"

"And now, dearest Clara," said Louisa, throwing her arms around her sister's neck, and gazing upon her with all her young heart's innocent and enthusiastic devotion,—"tell me, dearest Clara, are you yourself happy?—do you like the gaiety and bustle of the metropolis?—or do you long to return to the peaceful retreat at Canterbury? Tell me, in fine, all—everything that regards you."

"Yes, dearest Louisa," answered Clara, embracing her fondly: "I will tell you everything—and you will perceive that I have all possible reason to be happy. In fact, dearest Louisa, if I have kept until some such occasion as this—I mean until we should thus meet and I could speak to you concerning many, many things which I could not so well have committed to paper—if I have kept all this till now, I say, you will not be angry——"

"Ah! my dearest sister, you have made me so happy," cried Louisa, "by your assurances relative to Jocelyn, that I am in a humour to behold everything in this world in the brightest and gayest co-

lours. Yes—a roseate atmosphere now appears to surround me, displacing the murky mist in which I have been living, breathing, moving, and also losing myself as it were, for the last fortnight. Tell me, then, that you are happy, dearest Clara: and that assurance, coming from your lips, will enhance—Oh! unspeakably enhance—the joy which I myself now feel. Yes—and I shall be the more happy, too, if it be possible, because such assurance will convince me that *you*, my dearest sister, have not experienced the blighting, withering influence of that atmosphere of fashion in which you have been moving."

"What mean you, Louisa?" asked Clara, gazing upon her sister with so singular an expression that had the young maiden been more experienced in the world's ways, and more deeply read in the science of the human heart, she would immediately have felt uneasy—perhaps dismayed—by that look which Clara fixed upon her.

"I mean," responded the artless, innocent, unsuspecting girl, "that Lady Ernestina Dysart drew ere now such a shocking picture of fashionable life, that she made me shudder."

"Ah! what did she tell you?" inquired Clara.

"Oh! it was indeed very shocking," answered Louisa, "and filled me with a sudden aversion for what is called the fashionable world. Lady Ernestina spoke to me of a certain celebrated beauty—I forget her name at this moment——"

"Try and remember," said Clara, throwing her arm in such a way round Louisa's neck that she drew the young virgin's beauteous head down upon her own fine bust.

"Oh! I recollect now," cried Louisa: "it was Venetia Trelawney."

"Ah!" said Clara. "And what did Lady Ernestina tell you about her?"

"That she was as depraved as she was beautiful," replied Louisa, whose cheek still remained pillowed against Clara's bosom. "But doubtless you are acquainted with everything regarding this Venetia, since her story appears to be the topic of the fashionable world. Only conceive such dreadful depravity as to marry a young, handsome, and clever man, and immediately after the honeymoon lend a willing ear to the improper overtures of that wicked, wicked man the Prince Regent! O Clara, if you ever meet this Venetia—or Lady Sackville, as I believe she is now called—I do sincerely hope you will never speak to her. It positively makes my cheeks glow with indignation and also with shame, when I think that the entire sex to some extent shares in the infamy of such creatures. Ah! and *your* cheeks glow also, my beloved Clara," exclaimed the beauteous girl, suddenly raising her head and observing the deep carnation which overspread her sister's countenance. "Oh! I was well aware that your noble heart would feel as indignant and also as humiliated as I, to think that the name of Woman should be disgraced by such a shameless profligate as that Venetia."

"Let us talk no more of this," said Clara, the deep carnation hue suddenly sweeping away from her cheeks and leaving them very pale. "Yes—yes—the atmosphere of London is indeed unfitted for a flower of innocence and purity such as thou—and therefore must we part soon, dear sister, and you must lose no time in returning to Canterbury. Sir Douglas Huntingdon's carriage will take you to Blackheath or Dartford, where you can obtain a post-chaise: and as it is now but two o'clock, you will reach Canterbury to-night ere it be very late."

"You seem, dear Clara, as if you wished to hurry me suddenly away?" said Louisa, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"No—do not think me unkind, my sweet sister," returned Clara: "but I feel that London is not fitted for you—Oh! no, it is not fitted for *you*—and God in his mercy forbid that it ever should be," added Clara, with a strong emphasis.

"Well, dear sister," observed the younger girl, as she wiped away her tears, "I will do as you desire. But recollect that you have not as yet told me one word relative to yourself: and you ere now led me to believe that you had many things to tell me—yes, even secrets, which you had not chosen to commit to paper, but for which you awaited the opportunity of our meeting."

"Oh! I have nothing to tell you of such great importance as you seem to imagine," said Clara, with a smile, which did not however appear to take its inspiration from the full glow of a heart's unalloyed happiness. "You know that fond, loving, and affectionate sisters such as we are, always have a hundred little trifles and sweet nothings to tell each other, and which they treasure up for the day of meeting——"

"Then you have really nothing of importance to tell me?" said Louisa, with a tone and look of disappointment. "I thought you were perhaps going to reveal to me some matters indicative of your own complete and consummate happiness."

"No—that is to say—I mean yes," ejaculated Clara, somewhat falteringly: then in a hurried tone, she added, "But I have already told you, by the bye, in my letters, that my dear kind friends, the Beckfords, have adopted me as their daughter, and intend to leave me all their fortune."

"Yes—you have already told me this," said Louisa; "and I have congratulated you in return: for of course you are well aware, Clara, that your happiness is as dear to me as my own—or even dearer: for I would endure anything sooner than be compelled to hear that you were unhappy."

"Dear Louisa—dear, dear girl," cried Clara, embracing her fervidly and fondly: "and be assured—Oh! be assured, that I entertain precisely the same feeling for you! But we must now part, Louisa—we must indeed: for it is time that you should return homeward; and I am also compelled to leave town again immediately to rejoin Mr. and Mrs. Beckford—otherwise I would accompany you part of the distance. But I repeat, Sir Douglas Huntingdon will escort you in his carriage as far as Blackheath—or perhaps Dartford—where he will see you safe in a post-chaise."

The sisters now separated with many reiterated embraces, and also with many, many tears: and once more was Louisa consigned to the care of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. We need only add that the Baronet fulfilled his mission with delicacy and fidelity. He escorted her to Dartford, where he procured a post-chaise for her accommodation; and on parting from the lovely girl he experienced a sensation of ineffable joy to think that he had never once regarded her otherwise than with the utmost respect. 'Tis said that the lion crouches at the feet of a spotless maiden: and assuredly

the gay libertine—the lion of human society—acknowledged the power of virtue and the empire of innocence on the present occasion!

Louisa reached home between ten and eleven o'clock at night, without experiencing any further adventure worthy recording: but it was far otherwise with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as will appear in the following chapter.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

SHOOTER'S HILL.

HAVING acquitted himself thus honourably of the duty confided to him, the Baronet remained to dine at the principal hotel at Dartford; and as his horses had done good service during the day, they required ample leisure for bait and rest. He did not therefore hurry himself as to the hour of departure; and moreover, he fell in with agreeable company in the coffee-room of the tavern. For there had been a steeple-chase in the neighbourhood in the morning; and several sporting characters who had taken part in the barbarian "amusement," were now winding up the day's diversions with a good dinner and a jovial glass at the hotel. The Baronet, who liked such company and loved his bottle also, was therefore induced to remain with the convivialists until a somewhat late hour: indeed, it was considerably past ten o'clock when he ordered his carriage to be got ready—and another half-hour elapsed ere he had finished his wine, paid his bill, and set out on the journey homeward.

The footman who was in attendance on the vehicle sate next the coachman on the box; and as the night was very dark, the carriage-lamps had been lighted. But a dense mist, arising from the Thames, was borne by a sluggish northerly breeze over the southern bank of the river, enveloping the main road which the equipage was pursuing. The lamps accordingly shone as dimly as if through the dullest ground-glass; and the feeble glimmering thus thrown forth, was barely sufficient to enable the coachman to avoid the hedges, banks, ditches, or fences, which by turns skirted the road.

The carriage accordingly proceeded at a leisurely pace; and Sir Douglas sank into a sound sleep under the influence of the liquor he had imbibed at Dartford. It was close upon midnight when the equipage began the long, tedious, and gloomy ascent of Shooter's Hill—that spot which, until a very recent period, was so memorable for the exploits of highwaymen. Still the Baronet dozed on upon the comfortable cushions of the carriage: but all in a moment he was startled from his sleep by the abrupt stoppage of the vehicle, followed by the instantaneous plunging of the horses, together with several rough voices speaking menacingly.

Letting down the window, the Baronet became aware that his carriage was attacked by robbers: and having no weapons of any kind with him, he was unable to offer the slightest resistance. Besides which, the night was of such impenetrable gloom that he could literally see nothing of what was going on: but the voices which he heard enabled him to comprehend in a moment that his servants were overpowered, and that the ruffians were menacing them with death if they dared make any farther noise.

Thus far all that had happened since the Baronet was startled from his nap, was the work of a few seconds: and putting forth his hand, he was about to open the door when a couple of fellows came up to the window. One of them immediately seized the carriage-lamp on that side, and thrust it into the vehicle, turning it in such a way that its light fell full upon the Baronet's countenance.

"He's a good-natured looking feller," said one in a gruff voice; "and so I suppose he'll stand summut handsome."

"To be sure he will, Bob" answered the other ruffian. "Now, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Sir Douglas, "your watch, your rings, your diamond breast-pin, and as a matter of course, your purse! If not by fair means, we will have them by foul:"—and he placed a double barrelled pistol so close to the Baronet's forehead as to cause him to tremble in spite of himself.

"Now, then, be quick, you sir," said the other ruffian, who had been addressed as Bob. "Don't frighten the genelman out of his senses, Buttoner."

"Well, I don't want to, if so be he'll only make haste," observed the individual thus addressed, as he withdrew the pistol from the close vicinage of the Baronet's countenance.

Sir Douglas, perceiving that resistance was vain, nevertheless hoped that if he could only keep the villains in parley, succour might arrive.

"Now, my good fellows," he accordingly said, surveying their countenances by the dim light of the carriage-lamp, and observing that one was a villanous looking man with a black patch over the eye, and that the other, who was called the Buttoner, was a jovial, well-favoured person,—"now, my good fellows, I am quite ready to surrender up everything I have about me, if you like: but as I value my watch and my rings, I will pay you a fairer price for their ransom than you will get for them if you take them from me."

"Well, let's first look at the purse," said Bob—the fellow with the black patch over his eye, and who was no other than the Durrynacker to whom the reader was introduced at Bencull's dark crib.

The Baronet accordingly drew forth his purse, which was found to contain something more than twelve guineas.

"Well, this here ain't no great shakes," cried the Buttoner. "I say, Ben," he exclaimed, raising his voice and turning his head away from the window, "the genelman proposes a compromise for the yack, the fawneys, and so on." *

"Well, let it be so," said a hoarse thick voice in reply: and this indeed was none other than Mr. Bencull speaking, and who was mounting guard on the box over the coachman and footman.

"Wery good," said the Buttoner. "Now, sir, please to step down:"—and thus speaking, he opened the door of the carriage and lowered the steps.

"But where am I to go?" demanded the Baronet.

"Never do you mind," answered the Buttoner: "come along with us—that's all."

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* Yack, watch—fawneys, rings.

"Oh! if it be necessary to go any distance, I would sooner give up my personal property at once," said the Baronet, who had thus involved himself in a dilemma which he little anticipated when proposing the compromise: "or else, can I not write you a cheque upon my banker on a leaf torn out of my pocket-book."

"No, no, sir—we don't do business in that way," responded the Buttoner, sharply. "You was the first to propose the compromise; and therefore we'll stick to it. Now then, how is it to be?" he demanded, again appealing to his confederate on the box.

"Oh! let your young woman manage it," replied Bencull.

"Be it so," said the Buttoner: then addressing himself in hasty and imperious terms to the Baronet, he continued, "Now, sir, you will give your servants orders to pay a hundred guineas to the bearer of a letter from you to that effect to-morrow morning; and you will tell them that if so be the young woman doesn't come back with the money by one o'clock to-morrow afternoon, we shall take it for granted that there's been foul play and that she's been took into custody: so that without more ado we shall draw a knife across your throat—do you understand, sir?"

"Yes—yes—perfectly well," replied the Baronet, uncommonly annoyed at the turn the adventure was taking, and inwardly cursing himself for not having surrendered up his jewellery without the suggestion of a compromise. "But you surely don't intend to hold me as a hostage until to-morrow afternoon?" he said, in a tone that betrayed his vexation.

"By jingo, but we do though!" exclaimed the Buttoner. "So no more palaver—but give your orders to your servants, and let the carriage depart."

"Well, since there is no help for it, be it as you say," observed the Baronet, with a philosophical resignation to an adventure which after all threatened to be more inconvenient than perilous: then addressing himself to the footman, he said, "James you have heard what has taken place, and you will tell the housekeeper to pay the hundred guineas to any person who shall present a letter from me to-morrow morning to that effect. You will likewise tell Mrs. Baines that the person presenting such letter is to receive no molestation nor hindrance."

The footman promised a faithful attention to his master's orders: whereupon Bencull relieved that lacquey and the coachman from the terrors of his presence on the box and the imminence of his pistols;—and the instant he alighted the carriage drove rapidly away.

The whole of this scene did not occupy above five minutes, the colloquy which has taken us so long to record having passed with all the haste and hurry of the accompanying excitement.

And now, while the carriage was proceeding on its course, with the coachman and lacquey congratulating themselves on their escape, the Baronet was seized upon by the three ruffians and hurried into the thicket skirting that side of the road which was farthest from the Thames. Through the deep impenetrable darkness did the robbers conduct their captive, to whom it was evident, by the rapid and unhesitating pace at which they advanced, that they were perfectly familiar with the locality. Such indeed was the case: for they were pursuing a beaten pathway through the wood, and in which they were enabled to keep with precision, inasmuch as the sinking of their feet on the damp ground on either side at once made them aware when there was the slightest divergence from that well-trodden path.

For upwards of a quarter of an hour did they thus proceed at a rapid rate. No violence was offered to the Baronet: but a firm grasp was kept upon him, in order to prevent his escape. Scarcely a word was spoken as they thus proceeded through that night of pitchy gloom; and at the expiration of the interval just named, a dim light was observed twinkling a little ahead. In two or three minutes the party halted suddenly at the door of what appeared to be a cottage, or hut, and whence the light had emanated.

The door was opened by another ill-looking rascal, who, we may as well observe at once, was the Mushroom Faker—another of the delectable company whose acquaintance our readers have made at Jacob's Island.

The Baronet was now introduced into a rude and dilapidated room, furnished with one or two benches and a couple of tables made of the roughest materials. The entire aspect of the place was of the most wretched and cheerless description. On one table stood a bottle, a glass, a plate, and a huge knife with a buck-horn handle; for the Mushroom Faker had only just concluded his supper at the moment when his companions arrived with their captive.

"Sit down, sir," said the Buttoner, "and make yourself at home. I suppose there's some kind of lush here," he continued, taking up the bottle and holding it against the flame of a tallow candle with a long flaring wick. "Yes, to be sure there is:"—and filling the glass with brandy he tossed the dram down his throat. "Now, sir, pray help yourself to this here lush; and I can promise you'll find it excellent. In fact, you must make yourself as comfortable as you can, while I go and see what my young woman can do towards accommodating you for the night."

The Baronet made no reply, but threw a look of bitter annoyance round the room, and of disgust upon the Buttoner: then seating himself on a rough stool at the clumsy table, he once more endeavoured to sooth his annoyance and resign himself to the temporary inconveniences of his position.

The Buttoner opened a small door and ascended a narrow staircase, which creaked and groaned beneath his heavy tread—while Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker sat down at the second table and began drinking as fast and furiously as if they had never tasted strong waters before in their lives. It was notwithstanding pretty evident that there was no lack of the alcoholic fluid in the hut, as indeed the numerous bottles which appeared on the shelves of an open cupboard satisfactorily proved.

In a few minutes the Buttoner came down-stairs again; and presenting a sheet of paper, writing materials, and sealing-wax to the Baronet, he said, "Now, sir, you'll please to draw up at once that there letter which is to be delivered to your housekeeper—Mrs. Baines, as I think you called her: cos why, my young woman will get up precious

early in the morning, so as to be at your house in town, wherever it is, by eight or nine o'clock."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately proceeded to pen the requisite instructions for the payment of the hundred guineas to the bearer; and having affixed his signature to the letter, he was about to seal it when the Buttoner leant over his shoulder, observing in a coarse tone of familiarity, "Beg pardon, sir—but I must see what you have wrote, if you please."

"By all means," observed the Baronet, scarcely attempting to conceal his disgust. "But if you did not mean me to close the letter, why did you bring the sealing-wax."

"I fancied you would rayther seal it," was the reply; "so that when delivered at your door to-morrow morning, it won't be read by no one but her as it is addressed to. But all this isn't no reason why I shouldn't see aforehand what the letter really contains. Howsumever, it's all right—and so now you can seal it."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly secured the letter; and having duly addressed it to Mrs. Baines, his housekeeper in London, he gave it into the hands of the Buttoner. This individual once more hurried up the narrow ricketty staircase, at the top of which was a bedroom—if a place with a quantity of dirty flock scattered upon the floor, a wretched coverlid, a rudely-constructed table, a chipped bason, and a cracked ewer, deserves such an appellation.

In this wretched apartment Nell Gibson was seated. A bottle of spirits and a glass stood upon the table; and as the light of the solitary candle played flickeringly upon her countenance, it showed that her features were slightly flushed with drinking. Her apparel was in striking contrast with the miserable aspect of the place. She wore gold earrings: a silk boddice, fitting close to her shape, displayed the luxuriant proportions of her figure;—her arms were bare to the shoulder—and the short skirts of her dress revealed her well-formed ancles up to the swell of the leg. A handsome bonnet and scarf lay upon the bench where she was seated; and when the Buttoner re-appeared this second time in the chamber, she was counting a few guineas which she had taken from a new silk purse.

We have already informed our readers that there had been a grand steeple-chase in the neighbourhood that morning; and great numbers of persons had been attracted to the vicinage of Shooter's Hill, not only from the adjacent towns of Dartford, Woolwich, and Greenwich, but also from the metropolis. To take advantage of this opportunity of displaying their particular genius and exercising their craft, Bencull, the Durrynacker, the Buttoner, and Nell Gibson had appeared upon the scene: while the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling had likewise paid a visit to the same neighbourhood and for the same purpose. Of course the two parties had thus met in pursuance of previous arrangement: but we shall not pause to describe the various ways in which all these worthies, male and female, turned the proceedings of the day and the presence of a large concourse of people, to their own special advantage. Suffice it to say that they managed to reap a very tolerable harvest; and when evening came the two parties took a very friendly leave of each other. On the one hand, Daniel Coffin, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling repaired to a small, lonely, but convenient ale-house at a short distance amongst the fields, to take up their quarters till morning: while, on the other hand, Bencull, the Buttoner, the Durrynacker, and Nell Gibson had already arranged to pass the night at the rude hut in the immediate vicinage of Shooter's Hill.

Now this hut belonged to no less a personage than the Mushroom-Faker. The reader will scarcely require to be told that it was a very convenient haunt for such personages as those just named: and accordingly, when business was slack at Jacob's Island, they often sought the rude hut for the purpose of seeing what they could pick up by nights on Shooter's Hill. It was also a retreat for any member of the fraternity whom circumstances compelled to "keep out of the way" for a while;—and suspicion was averted from the place by the maintenance of an air of the most abject poverty. The gamekeepers of the district fancied that it was occupied only by a poor inoffensive umbrella-mender, who was frequently absent on long journeys: whereas, in reality, it was the scene of many crimes and the hiding-place of many criminals.

We need only add in explanation of present incidents, that Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Buttoner, flushed with the success of their proceedings amongst the crowds collected for the steeple-chase in the morning, had resolved not to allow the night to pass without "trying their luck" on Shooter's Hill. Hence the stoppage of the Baronet's carriage, and the circumstances which led to his introduction to the hut.

We stated that upon ascending the stairs a second time, the Buttoner found Nell Gibson counting her money: and as he tossed her the letter which he had just received from the Baronet down-stairs, he said, "Here, gal, is the dokiment that will produce a hundred guineas to-morrow-morning."

"So much the better," observed the young woman, with a smile of satisfaction: "*this* is something like a night's adventure. Let me see—there's five of us—that will be twenty guineas apiece: because although you and me are now as good as one, yet we go shares as two."

"Oh! to be sure," said the Buttoner: "that's understood! You'll have to start off precious early in the morning, Nell, so as to deliver that letter by eight or nine o'clock, and make sure of the money. Not that it matters much, so far as the swell cove his-self is concerned: for we don't mean to part with him quite so easy. In fact," added the Buttoner, lowering his voice to a whisper, "we don't mean to part with him at all."

"Then what *do* you mean?" asked Nell, in her usually quiet way, as if it were impossible for her to be surprised, startled, or alarmed by any announcement that could be made or any plan that could be revealed.

"Why, the swell cove has got such a handsome yack and chain, such beautiful fawneys, and such a sweet breastpin—besides which, his toggery is so precious good—that it would raly be a sin to let such wallyables slip through our fingers. And therefore," added the Buttoner, in a still lower whisper and with an ominous look, "we mean to put him wery comfortably out of the way. Be-

sides, dead men tell notales—and since he has seen all our precious faces and would have no trouble in recognising us again, it's much better to give him his gruel."

"Who is he?" asked Nell Gibson. "Do you know his name? Because if he happens to be any great person, there would be such a precious piece of work that no stone would be left unturned till his fate was discovered."

"To be sure I know who he is," returned the Buttoner. "You don't think I should have been fool enough to let him seal up that there letter afore I read it through? But I say, Nell, you don't object to having this swell cove made away with—do ye?"

"Not I indeed," returned this young woman who beneath a handsome exterior concealed the implacable and remorseless spirit of a fiend. "And even supposing I did object, I know very well that if Bencull has once made up his mind, neither heaven nor earth could move him to the contrary."

"Well, he has then, I can tell you," returned the Buttoner: "for although not a word has passed our lips on the subject, yet me and him and the Durrynacker and Mushroon Faker, have settled the pint with our looks."

"I suppose you will wait till I come back to-morrow to say whether I have got the money or not?" observed Nell Gibson.

"There's no use waiting at all," answered the Buttoner. "Whether he's alive or dead at eight o'clock to-morrow morning, won't make no difference in your getting the money: and as for sticking a knife in a feller in cold blood during the daytime, I raly couldn't do it. It's all wery well at night, when one has had plenty of lush to make one plucky——"

"Well, you know best—and it's quite the same to me," interrupted Nell Gibson, with a yawn. "But after all you havn't told me what his name is," she observed carelessly, as she turned the letter over and over in her hand.

"*Douglas Huntingdon* the signature is," answered the Buttoner. "But what's the matter, Nell?" he demanded, as she suddenly dropped the letter on the floor.

"Nothing. Why do you ask?" she inquired, stooping down to pick up the letter: then having done so, she looked up in the Buttoner's face, saying, "Why did you ask me that question, I repeat?"

"Because I thought you started and looked queer all of a sudden," was the response.

"Not I indeed," she observed in an off-hand manner, as she steadily met the keen searching gaze which the Buttoner fixed upon her for a few moments. "Do you think he suspects he is in any danger?" she asked: "because if so, it would be well to lull him into security."

"That's just what I want," responded the Buttoner. "I shouldn't like for us all to have to set upon him while he's awake, and so massacre him as one may say. I had much rayther that he would lie down and go to sleep—and then we could do his business all quiet and comfortable, without leaving no tell-tale stains about the place. In fact, I told him just now that I would come up-stairs and see what accommodation my young woman could make for him."

"Well, why don't you go and tell him he can have a bedroom, such as it is?" said Nell Gibson. "Or I tell you what," she added, a thought suddenly appearing to strike her, "if you like I'll go down-stairs and invite him to come up here."

"Well, do so if you fancy you'll succeed," replied the Buttoner. "There's no harm in trying it on."

"No harm at all," echoed Nell Gibson: and with this observation she descended to the room below, the Buttoner remaining up-stairs.

The moment she made her appearance in the lower apartment, she threw a rapid look of intelligence upon Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker, who were boozing at one table, while she advanced towards the Baronet who was still seated at the other. The three villains understood by this look that she had some project in hand; and they therefore affected to take no particular notice of her. This was precisely what she wanted: her object was to divert their attention, or at all events cause them to look aside for a moment, while she had an opportunity of making a sign of intelligence to the Baronet. Indeed, had she not by such a sign enjoined him to hold his peace, an exclamation of astonishment would have burst from his lips: for Nell Gibson was indeed no stranger to *him*—and he had instantaneously recognised her!

Yes—her form was fuller and grosser, her looks were bolder, and her mien was more brazen than when he saw her last: nevertheless, he failed not to recognise in an instant that countenance which he had once admired, and that form whose virgin charms had been despoiled by him!

The ejaculation, then, of amazement which was about to burst forth, died upon his lips as he caught that signal which she made him: and instantly perceiving by her manner that she had in view some purpose which she wished to conceal from the ruffians at the other end of the room, he suddenly assumed an air of perfect composure, so as not to betray that any secret intelligence existed between them.

"You are sure, sir," she said, holding up the letter, "that this document will meet with proper attention to-morrow morning?"

"I am certain of it," he replied. "The men who brought me hither, overheard the instructions which I gave to my servants ere they departed with the carriage——"

But while Sir Douglas Huntingdon was thus, speaking, Nell Gibson said in a low rapid whisper, "*Fly hence, I conjure you!*"

Startling as these words were, inasmuch as they revealed to him in a moment all the dangers of his position, he nevertheless had the presence of mind to continue speaking the sentence which we have recorded;—and thus his voice drowned the whispered accents of the female.

"Well, sir," she said aloud, as if in answer to the observation which he had made,—"I do hope that it will not be a wild-goose chase that I shall have to-morrow morning. And now, sir, as you have got to stay here all night, I am sent to propose that you walk up-stairs and lie down."

But as she thus spoke, she gave a slight and just perceptible shake of the head, as much as to tell him *not* to accept her offer.

"Thank you, young woman," he said aloud, with a look which showed that he not only experienced

a full sense of the danger of which she had made him aware, but likewise the deepest gratitude towards herself,—"thank you, young woman, I would rather not. Presently—when I feel tired—I will avail myself of the offer."

And while Sir Douglas was thus speaking, in such a manner as perfectly to cover Nell's whispered accents, she breathed in the lowest tone the following words:—"*The door is not fastened—watch your opportunity—seize that knife—and escape!*"—then, immediately afterwards, she said aloud, and in a calm placid voice, "Would you like anything to eat, sir? We have provisions in the place; and because you are a prisoner for a few hours, there's no reason why you should be starved."

"No, I thank you—I require nothing," responded the Baronet: and as he threw a rapid, furtive, sidelong glance towards the three men at the other end of the room, he saw in the sinister signs they were making together, a horrible confirmation of the dire alarms which Nell Gibson had excited in his breast.

"I wish you good night, sir," she said: and darting upon him another look of intelligence, she turned away.

Ascending the staircase to the chamber above, she re-appeared in the presence of the Buttoner, who was paying his respects to the brandy-bottle there.

"Well, gal—I see it's no use?" he observed. "The swell cove wouldn't be enticed up here—eh?"

"But he doesn't suspect anything wrong," returned the young woman with the most perfect composure of countenance. "It is quite clear he fancies himself safe enough from danger, and that he will be let loose again to-morrow when I come back with the money."

She then sat down by the side of the Buttoner, with an air as composed and self-possessed as if she had betrayed nothing of the contemplated horrors.

In the meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon had remained sitting at the table in the apartment below. Cold—ice-cold was the tremor that seized upon him as he reflected on the appalling perils by which he was surrounded. Though no coward, he could not help shrinking in dismay from the chasm on the brink of which he appeared to stand. As he glanced furtively around upon the three men who were boozing at the other table, he fancied that murder was written upon their very countenances. Averting his eyes in dread horror, he cast them down upon the floor: and, behold! they settled on stains which instantaneously struck him to be those of blood. His looks were startled away from that hideous point of view: and as they swept in frightened rapidity around, they caught *other* stains upon the wooden wall, which likewise appeared to be the marks of blood!

Shuddering to the very confines of his being, the Baronet felt as if he were indeed looking Death face to face. The pitchy darkness of the night that hung like a sable pall against the cottage-window—the awful stillness that prevailed around—the utter loneliness of that hut—the evil reputation of the neighbourhood—the deep solemn hour of midnight—and then those villanous countenances, which seemed more sinister and diabolical still as the faint flickering light played upon them,—all these influences and circumstances combined to fill his soul with a fearful consternation and a horrible dismay!

Scarce a quarter of an hour had elapsed since he had refused in disgust the dram of brandy which the Buttoner had offered to him: but now he hastened to pour it out and greedily swallow it to revive his drooping courage. In a moment the burning fluid appeared to flash like lightning through his veins: it was the spark to a whole train of excitement which had been subdued for a few minutes by the weight of an overwhelming consternation.

Yes—all was now haste in his thoughts—hurry in his ideas—a dizzy whirl in his brain. The red right arm of murder seemed to be extended over him: the gleaming blade appeared to be ready to plunge down into his heart;—and his eyes swept wildly around to assure himself that the ruffians were not already standing behind him, or creeping stealthily towards him. No—they were still seated at the table, drinking and talking. The man Bencull had thrown off his coat and appeared in his shirt-sleeves. This in reality was because the night was close, the room was hot, and much liquor had made him feverish: but to the excited imagination of Sir Douglas Huntingdon it appeared as if the fellow were preparing himself to do the work of murder, as a butcher prepares for the slaughter of an ox;—and now wrought up to a pitch of desperation, the Baronet snatched up the knife—made but one bound from his seat to the door—lifted the latch—and darted forth into the pitchy blackness of the night.

With ejaculations of amazement and fury, Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Mushroon-Faker rushed after the fugitive: and those cries of rage, reaching the chamber above, told Nell Gibson that the Baronet had escaped, and startled the Buttoner with the conviction that something was wrong. Rushing down the stairs, he found the lower room empty and the door wide open: and he was about to dart forth and join in the pursuit, when an idea that flashed to his brain, struck him as it were with the sudden blow of a hammer, and made him stop short in the midst of his furious excitement, as a drunken man is sobered all in a moment by some fearful announcement.

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE FAIR STRANGER.

THE thought which thus suddenly arrested the steps of the Buttoner and transfixed him to the spot, was that Nell Gibson had betrayed the murderous project to the Baronet.

Our readers will remember a certain conversation which took place a fortnight previously to the present date of our story, between Bencull and the Hangman relative to the employment of Nell Gibson to lead Larry Sampson into a trap. It will likewise be borne in mind that "to make sure doubly sure," in a scheme of so dangerous and delicate a character, they had resolved to plant the Buttoner as a spy upon Nell Gibson's actions. Being well provided with cash and good clothes, the Buttoner had found these proofs of prosperity to be immediate passports to the favour of Miss Gibson; and he accordingly took up his abode with her at Mrs.

Young's delectable establishment in Bermondsey. He and Nell were therefore living as husband and wife together; and we have already shown how it was that they happened to be at the hut near Shooter's Hill on the night of which we are writing.

Now, be it observed that the Buttoner was expressly employed and also bribed by Bencull and the Hangman to watch Nell Gibson's conduct. This circumstance was alone sufficient to render him far more susceptible of misgiving than he otherwise would have been, and more liable to entertain suspicion at the slightest appearance of anything mysterious or sinister. Thus, when he suddenly recollected how Nell Gibson had started, and how strange she had looked for a moment, when he mentioned the Baronet's name to her, he was struck by the idea that she had played the traitress.

Instead, therefore, of rushing out in pursuit of the fugitive, the Buttoner turned back from the threshold of the hut, and faced Nell Gibson just as she reached the bottom of the stairs down which she had followed him.

"You see this swell cove has escaped," he said, fixing his eyes upon her with a keenness that appeared to penetrate her through and through.

"I see it indeed," she answered, encountering his gaze with an unwavering steadiness, although upon her cheek there seemed to be a slight, slight changing of colour, and on the lips the least, least twitching of nervousness.

"What did you say to him just now, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner, scarcely knowing what to think, but at all events too uncertain as to her manner to feel justified in accusing her point blank on the spot.

"I merely asked him whether he was sure that the money would be paid to-morrow morning," replied Nell, perceiving that she was suspected, but still maintaining an air of perfect self-possession;

"and when he had assured me that there would be no mistake on that head," she continued, "I asked him whether he chose to lie down to rest or to partake of any refreshment."

"And that was all that took place?" said the Buttoner, still keeping his eyes steadily fixed upon her.

"That was all," she answered, the colour neither coming nor going now upon her cheeks, nor her lip betraying even the slightest uneasiness. "But whatever mischief may follow from this escape," she observed in a tone of vexation mingled with reproach, "you and the others have only got yourselves to thank for it. You should have made the door fast, and not left the bird an opportunity to fly out of his cage."

"By jingo! what you say is true enough, Nell," exclaimed the Buttoner, feeling how justly merited was the remonstrance: then advancing to the door, which still stood wide open, he listened with suspended breath, while with straining eyes he endeavoured to penetrate the pitchy blackness of the night.

"Well, can you hear anything?" asked the young woman, as he turned back again from the door, leaving it however wide open.

"Nothing — not even the rustling of the branches," he replied, with a terrible imprecation. "Do you know, Nell, this is a very serious business and may end cursed badly? Like infernal fools that we were, we once or twice let slip each other's names; and so, what with knowing these, and being able to describe our precious faces, this swell cove, if he makes good his escape, will be able to give such information against us as shall make London too hot to hold us. Then, my eyes! won't Larry indeed have something to be down upon us for!"

"How provoking," ejaculated Nell Gibson; "and just at the time, too, that I was getting Larry Sampson into such a nice state of credulity, that a few days more would entice him into the trap as safe and sure as possible!"

"Yes—it is deucedly provoking," growled the Buttoner: and once more he went to the threshold and listened attentively. "There's not a sound, not even the waving of the trees:" and again turning away from the door, he tossed off a bumper of brandy.

"What must we do?" inquired Nell, appearing to be very uneasy, although in her heart she knew full well that the Baronet would not be guilty of such black ingratitude as to give any information to the authorities calculated to compromise herself.

"What must we do?" echoed her paramour: "why, if our pals come back without the swell cove, we must get away from here as quick as ever we can. Who knows but what he may cut across to Greenwich and come back at once with a whole posse of constables? Or perhaps he may meet some travellers on the road——"

"Aye, truly!" cried Nell, affecting to be very seriously alarmed. "Let us go away at once. There's no use in staying here to be taken. Bencull and the others will know very well how to shift for themselves. Suppose we go down to the *Jolly Waggoner*, where Daniel Coffin and his party are."

"Well, go up-stairs and put on your toggery," interrupted the Buttoner, really beginning t think that it was high time to make themselves scarce.

Nell Gibson accordingly tripped up to the room above: but scarcely had she adjusted her bonnet and thrown her flaunting scarf over her previously much exposed shoulders and bosom, when she heard the sounds of voices below—and recognising Bencull's hoarse tones, she hastened down-stairs again, sick at heart with the apprehension that Sir Douglas had been re-taken.

Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker had indeed returned, as Nell had just expected: but instead of being accompanied by the Baronet, the first-mentioned of the three ruffians bore in his arms the inanimate form of a beautiful girl, while one of the others carried in his hand a bundle tied up in a shawl.

"What in the devil's name does this mean?" demanded the Buttoner, surveying his comrades with surprise and the senseless damsel with a look of admiration.

"Here's a present for Nell," said Bencull, with a salacious leer as he looked down upon the still and placid countenance of his fair burthen. "Nell will break her in, in the usual style——"

"Aye, that will I!" exclaimed the young woman, who was not only immensely relieved at finding her fears unfounded with regard to the recapture of the Baronet, but who was also much struck with the sweet, touching, and interesting beauty of the fair stranger, whose charms she already resolved upon turning into gold. "Mrs. Gale will give twenty guineas for this young creature: and I daresay the Marquis of Leveson, who is Mrs. Gale's best patron, will give her at least five times as much. But come—bring her up stairs and lay her down on the bed: for this swoon is so deep that it may be dangerous."

Bencull accordingly bore the beauteous girl in his arms to the chamber above; while Nell Gibson followed with the bundle which she took from the Mushroom Faker who was carrying it. The fair stranger was deposited softly and gently upon the heap of flock; and Nell Gibson, stooping down, unfastened her bonnet, which was much crushed, so as to give her air. A luxuriant profusion of soft and fine flaxen tresses now flowed over the wretched coverlid, whereon reclined the damsel's beauteous head: and though all tint of vital colouring had fled from her countenance, leaving it marble pale, and her eyes were closed as if in death, so still were the long brown lashes that rested on her cheeks,—yet was there an air of such Madonna-like sweetness and angelic beauty about this lovely girl, that only a heart so intensely selfish as that of Nell Gibson, or so brutally ferocious as that of Bencull, could have remained inaccessible to the soft stealing influence and silent magic of such charms.

The damsel was tall, slender, and of sylphid symmetry. Her apparel, though exceedingly plain, was very neat: and as she lay stretched upon that sordid couch, her drapery, humble as it was, seemed to have settled itself in purely classic folds, developing the flowing outlines of the form which it concealed, and displaying the exquisite shape of the beautifully modelled limbs.

It was not however in such an æsthetic light that Nell Gibson contemplated the sweetly re-

posing form of the inanimate maiden: but she did not fail to appreciate all the touching softness and all the tender interest that enveloped the fair stranger as with a halo; so that when she had removed the bonnet and beheld all that silken richness of the flaxen hair, setting off a countenance of virginal innocence—shoulders beautifully rounded and gently sloping—and a bust whose nascent charms were proportioned like a Grecian statue,—the young woman threw upon Bencull a look of delight, as she whispered, "This is indeed a prize that you have brought here!"

"Well, you may thank the night-coach for upsetting just at the brow of Shooter's Hill," returned Bencull.

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Nell Gibson, surveying him with a look of astonishment at such a singular remark.

"I mean just this," answered the man: "that as me and the two pals reached the hill in search of that feller Huntingdon, we heard a noise of voices calling out, horses plunging, and all kind of confusion; while lights was dancing about on the spot that the noise came from. So we crept up to the place; and we soon found out what it was. The night-coach for Dover had upset; and there was a rare scene, if so be all that took place in the dark can be called a scene at all. But it wasn't quite in the dark neither; for the coachman and guard had got down the lamps and was moving about to see the extent of the mischief done. '*Here's this sweet young gal,*' says the guard, '*which sat next to me just now: she's pitched right on this bank, and is either stunned or dead:*'—and as he spoke he threw the light on her face and figure in such a manner that me and the two pals caught a full view of her, for she was laying within a couple of yards of the spot where we was hid in the shade. We saw quite enough of her to convince us that she was a sweet pretty creature; and the Mushroom Faker whispered in my ear, '*My eyes! if Nell Gibson only had that young gal in her hands for a week or so.*' These words was a hint; and without any more ado I took the young gal up in my arms the moment the guard turned away to attend to a inside passenger. Finding that her heart beat, I carried her right clean away from the spot, no one seeing the dodge in the darkness and the confusion. The Mushroom Faker kicked against a bundle which he accordingly picked up and brought with him; and as it was quite close to the place where the young girl was laying, I suppose it is her's."

"Well, the occurrence is a fortunate one," observed Nell Gibson: "for Mrs. Gale will pay handsomely for this young creature. She's delicate looking but beautiful as an angel, though I say it who know so little about angels—and perhaps never shall know any more. But what about the Baronet?" she demanded abruptly.

"Oh! he's a Baronet, is he?" exclaimed Bencull. "Yes—to be sure, I recollect there is a Baronet of the name of Huntingdon at the West End—I've heard of him afore: he's a pal of the Prince's. Well, I suppose he has got clean off: and precious awkward it is, too. I must go down stairs and see what our pals say about it. So I'll leave you to take care of this young gal."

With these words the ruffian quitted the chamber: and when the door had closed behind him, Nell Gibson took some water and sprinkled it upon the young damsel's countenance. The effect was soon visible—and slowly did the fair being begin to recover: her bosom rose and fell with the long and painful undulations of returning consciousness;—and opening a pair of the finest azure eyes that ever reflected the pure soul's light of innocence, she gazed up with a look of vacant inquiry into the countenance that was bending over her. Then, as her recollection gradually revived, and all the circumstances of the recent accident were recalled to her mind, she glanced around with an expression rather of gratitude than astonishment: for it naturally occurred to her that she was experiencing the hospitality of some humble dwelling near the scene of the coach-accident.

"Are you injured?—do you feel hurt?" inquired Nell Gibson, in a tone so kind and reassuring that it precluded the springing up of any immediate alarm or suspicion in the maiden's mind.

"No—I do not feel that I have sustained any serious injury, beyond a severe shock," answered the beauteous stranger, in a voice of the most touching melody: and as the colour came back with the delicate tinge of the rose-leaf to her cheeks, but with the deepest hue of that blushing flower to her exquisitely chiselled lips,—and as these lips revealed teeth white as oriental pearls, and exhaled the balmiest breath,—Nell Gibson could not help thinking that she had never seen a lovelier creature than this fair girl.

"You are welcome where you are, young lady," said Nell: "and if you can put up with such poor accommodation as I am able to afford, I shall be truly happy."

"My best thanks are due for your kindness," answered the damsel: and it was with a sort of ill-subdued shudder that she cast her eyes around that wretched, cheerless, poverty-stricken chamber. "But I must pursue my journey this night—I must return to the coach, which will no doubt continue its way——"

"The coach is so much injured," interrupted Nell, "that it will not be able to go on till the morning: and therefore you must make up your mind to stay here. Is that your bundle, Miss?"

"Yes—I thank you," was the answer, as the fair stranger glanced towards the object thus indicated. "But indeed—oh! indeed," she cried, in accents that bespoke a painful and increasing agitation, "I must even pursue my way on foot—for I have promised to be at Dover by a certain hour to-morrow?"—and as she thus spoke, she endeavoured to rise from the flock bed: but sinking back again with the weakness and exhaustion consequent upon her fall from the coach-top, she clasped her hands in a despairing manner—murmuring, "O God! what will *he* think?"

Then a faintness came over her—and she sank down again upon the wretched couch, deprived of consciousness.

* * * * * *

Meantime, in the apartment down stairs, Bob the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker had explained to the Buttoner the accident relative to the night-coach, and the manner in which the fair damsel had fallen into their hands.

"Well, I've no doubt but what my young woman

will turn her to precious good advantage," said the Buttoner. "But wouldn't it have been much better to go on looking after the swell cove, than to bother one's-self about young gals pitched from the top of stage-coaches?"

"This Huntingdon chap, you see, has slipped betwixt our fingers," said the Mushroom Faker: "and to think of looking any longer for him in the midst of this dark night was about as wise as to hunt for a needle in a haystack."

"Then we must all bolt off at once," said the Buttoner: "or else the swell-cove will p'r'aps come back with a posse of beaks at his heels."

"Now, then—who's giving way to idle fears like that there?—and where the deuce is the swell cove to get assistance or raise an alarm at this time of night?" demanded Bencull, who had just descended from the chamber above. "The circumstance of his knowing our precious names and having seen all our beautiful faces is the worst: cos why, it will make London too hot to hold us. Now then, I tell you what we will do," he continued, speaking with great rapidity. "There's no doubt this Baronet——"

"Baronet!" ejaculated the Buttoner. "How d'ye know he's a Baronet?"

"Why, your young woman says so," answered Bencull.

"Ah! Nell said so, did she?" observed the Buttoner, all his suspicions flaming up again, more vividly than ever, in his mind: but not deeming the present time a favourable opportunity to mention his misgivings, he said, "Well, go on, Bencull: what are we to do?—what do you advise?"

"Why, I should think," continued the landlord of the dark crib at Jacob's Island, "that the Baronet must have got down into the main road by this time: so either he is making for Dartford or else for Greenwich. Whichever it is, he *must* be overtook and done for, come what will. Now then, you and me, Buttoner, will cut right through the thicket and take the Dartford direction—while you two," he added, addressing himself to the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, "set off towards Greenwich. This is what we ought to have done at first: but it's better late than never—and we're pretty sure to overtake him."

"I'll just run up and let Nell know what we are doing," said the Buttoner.

"Don't stay a moment, then," observed Bencull.

The Buttoner hastened up-stairs and found Nell Gibson hanging over the fair stranger, just at the moment that the latter had sunk down again into a state of insensibility, as already described.

"I'm going off in pursuit of that swell cove, Nell," said the Buttoner, in a hurried manner and without suffering her to perceive that his suspicions were aroused again: "for Bencull says it must be done, and so we mean to dog him until we find him. You must stay here till we come back."

Nell Gibson dared not venture a word of remonstrance against this renewal of the pursuit after Sir Douglas Huntingdon: and on the other hand she experienced in reality no fears for her own safety in remaining at the hut, inasmuch as we have already said she was well convinced that the Baronet would adopt no extreme course calculated to compromise herself.

The Buttoner, having made her acquainted with the intended expedition, paused not to speak another word, but hastened down to rejoin his companions. They then all four issued from the hut, leaving Nell Gibson alone with the fair stranger.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

"THE JOLLY WAGGONER."—FRESH PERILS.

We must now return to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was destined this night to pass through so many strange and perilous adventures. At the moment he bounded forth from the hut in the manner already described, he knew full well that pursuit would be instantaneous. Accordingly, instead of rushing away straight a-head and plunging into the thicket in the direction of the road, he at once passed round to the back of the cottage and there posted himself, remaining as still and motionless as a statue. At the same time he heard his pursuers rushing forth from the door on the other side of the building; and as they at once made for the road, the Baronet had reason to congratulate himself on the success of his manœuvre. Not for an instant did the ruffians suspect that he had remained so near: and not only were they thus thrown completely off the right scent, but they could hear nothing—not a footfall amongst the dried leaves, nor the snapping of a twig—to mark the course which the fugitive Baronet might have taken.

Having suffered several minutes to elapse, Sir Douglas Huntingdon stole away from the vicinity of the cottage: and securing about his person the knife which he had brought with him, he proceeded at random through the intense blackness of the night. The reader will therefore understand that Sir Douglas was now advancing in the very opposite direction from that which his pursuers had taken: and while they had become engaged in the adventure of the overturned coach, as already stated, the object of their search was speeding across the fields towards a light that glimmered in the distance.

Cheered by the appearance of this ray, which he hoped would prove the beacon of hospitality as well as the harbinger of safety for the rest of the night, Sir Douglas increased his pace: but still he was compelled to advance with considerable caution, lest in the deep darkness which enveloped him he should fall into some pit, pond, or ditch. In about ten minutes he reached a stile, over which he clambered: and he now found himself in what appeared to be a narrow lane, on the other side of which, exactly facing the stile, stood a small building from one of whose lower windows glimmered the light that had guided him thither. He advanced up to the door: and now through the darkness of the night he beheld an object hanging, darker than the darkness, over its head. For the moment an indescribable feeling of alarm thrilled coldly through his frame: for it struck him that it was a human corpse thus suspended over-head. But the next instant he perceived by its shape, and also by the creaking sound it sent forth, that it was nothing more nor less than the projecting sign of an inn, or rather alehouse.

Encouraged by this discovery in proportion a

he had just previously been terrified, the Baronet felt assured of obtaining an asylum for the rest of the night; and on knocking at the door it was almost immediately opened by a stout red-faced man, with a rubicund nose and a drunken leer, both alike indicating a love of strong liquor. There could consequently be no mistake that this was the landlord; and Sir Douglas at once requested accommodation for the night.

"Well, I don't exactly know how that can be," answered the Boniface, keeping the door only half open, with his own burly form filling up the interval — while the light from within streamed with a sort of Rembrandt effect upon the Baronet, whose personal appearance was thus plainly visible to the landlord.

"How do you mean you do not know whether you can accommodate me?" cried Sir Douglas. "Is not this a house of public entertainment?"

"To be sure it is. The *Jolly Waggoner* is well known in these here parts: but there's been a steeple-chase in the neighbourhood to-day—and so, you see, I have got as much company as I can well accommodate."

"But is there another inn or tavern near?" asked the Baronet, in a tone of deep vexation.

"No—that there isn't," returned the landlord, still keeping fast in the doorway. "But where do you come from?—and how is it you are out so late? You seem a stylish kind of gentleman, notwithstanding."

"The truth is," answered Sir Douglas, "I am a man of rank and fortune. My carriage has been stopped by a set of ruffians on Shooter's Hill; and I was dragged away to a hut close by. There I should have been murdered, were it not for secret intimation given me by a young woman, of her companions' diabolical intentions. Thanks to her, my life is saved. I escaped—and wandering through the darkness, caught a glimpse of the light shining from your window. Now, then, will you refuse me admission?—for depend upon it, the accommodation which I seek will be liberally recompensed. If you wish to know who I am, my name is Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

We must pause for an instant to acquaint our readers that every syllable of this explanation was overheard by the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling, who had established their quarters at the *Jolly Waggoner* for the night. They had not as yet retired to rest, but had been carousing with the landlord until the moment the Baronet knocked at the front door. As he gave the above account of his adventures, the Hangman and his companions at once comprehended that it must have been Bencull's party who had waylaid the carriage; and they likewise understood that it was to the Mushroom Faker's hut the Baronet had been dragged. But no words can depict their astonishment, when they further gleaned from his explanations that it could have been none other than Nell Gibson who had given him the private information which induced him to escape. The Hangman and Sally Melmoth accordingly exchanged looks of ominous significancy, as they both muttered the name of Nell Gibson: and Jack the Foundling seemed equally amazed and indignant at the evident treachery of that young woman.

Now the landlord of the *Jolly Waggoner* was neither more nor less than one of the members of Daniel Coffin's extensive brotherhood of desperadoes: and therefore, as the Baronet revealed the details of his adventures, the fellow at once understood how he ought to act. But if he experienced any indecision on the point, it speedily vanished as the Hangman's voice reached his ears, in a gruff whisper from the fireplace where he was seated, — saying, "Let him in by all means."

The landlord coughed aloud in order to prevent that whisper reaching the Baronet: and assuming an air of profound civility, he said, "Pray walk in, sir. I am sorry that a gentleman of your rank and consideration should have been so scurvily treated in this here neighbourhood."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly entered the place; and as there was no passage of any kind, he at once found himself in what may be called the parlour or tap-room of that little alehouse. There were numerous Windsor chairs ranged round the walls—a huge deal table in the middle of the room—several spittoons upon the sanded floor—and a cheerful fire blazing in the grate. On the table were jugs of ale, a tray of pipes, and a paper of tobacco: and seated round the hearth were the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

Daniel Coffin was the first to make way for the Baronet: and so very polite and civil was he, that Sir Douglas failed to receive any evil impression from his particularly sinister countenance. The landlord, remarking "that it was very cold, and that his guest would no doubt like something warm," hastened into a little bar-parlour opening from the end of the room, and speedily returned with a reeking tumbler of brandy-and-water.

"And so, sir, you was unfortunate enough to get robbed, was you?" said the landlord, as he resumed his own seat in the chimney corner. "Only think," he continued, addressing himself to the Hangman, "of the gentleman being compelled to fly for his life. But what a good young woman it must have been that gave him such a hint."

"Yes," observed Daniel Coffin: "I heard the gentleman telling you the story at the door a minute ago; and I thought to myself what a lucky thing it was he got off so nice. But I really tremble for the poor young woman, in case she should be suspected by her companions——"

"Ah! you may well say *that*," exclaimed the landlord, taking his cue from the Hangman's words. "The rascals that infest this here neighbourhood, are the most murderous cut-throats that ever was; and if they only once suspected the young woman——"

"Oh! don't talk of it!" cried Sally Melmoth, pretending to be fearfully shocked: "the bare idea is enough to make one's blood run cold."

"Yes—it would indeed be very shocking," said the landlord, shaking his head with awful solemnity, "if the whole neighbourhood was frightened to-morrow morning by hearing that the poor creature was murdered in that terrible lonely hut."

"Good heavens!" cried Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had listened with increasing horror and dismay to this colloquy—so that his hair literally stood on end: "is it possible that such a frightful atrocity——"

"Possible indeed!" ejaculated the Hangman:

"aye—and very probable too. You see, sir, I am a farmer, living in these parts; and I have heard too much already of the dreadful character of the villains that infest Shooter's Hill."

"Villains indeed, Lord have mercy upon us!" said the landlord, looking as grave and solemn as his semi-intoxicated condition would permit.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" observed Sally Melmoth, clasping her hands in apparent dismay at the picture which her imagination was conjuring up: then fixing her eyes with fearful meaning upon the Baronet, she said, "Ah! sir, it would be a dreadful thing indeed if the poor young woman who has just saved *your* life, should lose her own on that very account!"

"By heavens, you have filled me with excruciating terrors!" exclaimed Sir Douglas, starting from his seat. "I did not think the young woman would run such a dreadful risk—or else not for worlds would I have abandoned her in a cowardly manner. But I see that you are right—they are indeed murderous miscreants—and if they should suspect the poor creature ——"

"I can't sit here quiet," interrupted the Hangman, also springing from his seat, "while perhaps murder is being done. No—I can't do it," he cried, with an air and tone of blunt honesty. "I'll go, even if I go alone—and prevent bloodshed there."

"No, brave man—you shall not go alone," exclaimed the Baronet, seizing Daniel Coffin's hand and pressing it with an effusion of the warmest admiration and gratitude. "We will go together—we will save that young woman if she be in danger: and at any rate we will take her away from her vile companions. See—I am armed with a knife," he added, unbuttoning his coat, and displaying the weapon which he had brought away with him from the hut.

"And I've fortunately got my barkers with me," said the Hangman, producing a pair of pistols. "But come—let us be off. Jack," he added, turning to the Foundling, "of course you will come with us. The more we are, the stronger we shall be ——"

"Oh! you shall not leave *me* behind," exclaimed Sally Melmoth. "I shall go with you. I long to be able to say a kind word to a woman who, though the companion of murderers, has dared to save a fellow creature's life at the hazard of her own."

"Well, you are a brave woman, wife," said the Hangman, pretending to tap her affectionately on the countenance; "and so you shall come. Now then, let us all be off."

The whole of this colloquy—indeed the entire scene, from the instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon crossed the threshold of the *Jolly Waggoner* until he issued forth again—scarcely occupied ten minutes. The theme of the discourse was full of excitement for the Baronet; and he found himself hurried away by a torrent of terrible misgivings relative to Nell Gibson on the one hand, and a chivalrous anxiety to redeem his character from any imputation of cowardice on the other. His feelings, therefore, being kept in a whirl the whole time, he neither had calmness enough to perceive that there was anything sinister in the looks of his new acquaintances, nor leisure to reflect upon the honesty of their motives. But yielding to the impulse which they had so artfully given to his feelings, he unhesitatingly sallied forth in company with the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

They all proceeded across the fields, the Hangman acting as the guide; and it was quite evident that, despite the Egyptian darkness which prevailed, he was well acquainted with the path. But then Sir Douglas Huntingdon remembered that the man had represented himself as a farmer belonging to the district; and it was therefore natural enough that he should be thus familiar with every inch of the locality. They advanced at a pace which was so rapid as to sustain the hurry of the Baronet's thoughts and the excitement of his feelings: and thus he had neither leisure nor scope for those reflections which would perhaps have engendered suspicions in his mind relative to the integrity of his present companions.

"There's the hut!" said the Hangman, as they presently beheld a light glimmering a-head.

"Had we not better approach with considerable caution?" inquired the Baronet.

"Yes—let us creep as quiet as we can up to the place," returned Coffin.

They accordingly advanced stealthily: and as they drew nearer, they observed that lights were burning in the room above as well as in the apartment below. On reaching the hut, they peeped through one of the windows on the ground floor: the candles were flaring with long wicks on the tables—but no one was in the apartment.

"I suppose the ruffians are all out looking for me," said the Baronet, in a low whisper.

"Most likely," responded the Hangman. "Let us enter the cottage."

He accordingly opened the door and passed in, followed by the Baronet, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

But scarcely had the party thus entered the hut, when the Hangman sprang at Sir Douglas Huntingdon like a tiger darting at its prey, and dashed him on the floor with such violence that he was stunned by the ruffianly outrage. The Hangman then tore open the Baronet's coat; and taking away the knife which Sir Douglas had concealed about his person, the ruffian flung it to a distance. His next proceeding was to draw forth a piece of rope from one of his own capacious pockets, in order to bind the Baronet hand and foot.

"I'll go up-stairs and see who's there," said Sally Melmoth, while her paramour was thus employed. "Perhaps that traitress Nell Gibson is up above, as a light is burning there," she added.

"You had better take care," observed the Hangman. "If she suspects that she's found out, she may do you a mischief: for she's not a woman to give in easy, I can tell you."

"Ah! then I had better prepare for a battle?" exclaimed Sally: and flinging off her bonnet and cloak, she seized the knife in one hand and a candle in the other, her whole appearance suddenly denoting the natural ferocity of her disposition when her choler was once excited. "Now if that she-devil, who I always hated and also suspected, should attempt any of her nonsense, I'll plunge *this* deep down into her heart:"—and she brandished the knife menacingly, her countenance, which was by no means bad looking, being now distorted with the workings of diabolical passions.

"Go with her, Jack," said Daniel Coffin, who

was still employed in binding the Baronet's limbs. "I must make this fellow fast, so that he may give no trouble when he comes to himself. But I say, Sal,—and you too, Jack,—mind—no murder up above there! If you find Nell Gibson, which I don't suppose you will, as the place is so quiet—but if you *do*, I say, make her your prisoner: because we will wait till all the other fellows come back before dealing with either her or this Baronet here."

But before he had even finished speaking, Sally Melmoth had ascended the stairs, closely followed by Jack the Foundling. On reaching the top, they pushed open the great clumsy door: and bursting in, they were struck with amazement on beholding a young creature of about seventeen, and of exquisite beauty, sleeping tranquilly upon the wretched couch spread on the floor.

We should now observe that when the fair stranger had relapsed into a state of unconsciousness, in the manner already described, Nell Gibson had done her best to restore her to life. She soon succeeded: but so weak and exhausted was the lovely damsel in consequence of the fall she had sustained from the coach-top, that she only awoke from a state of insensibility to fall into one of profound slumber. Finding that she thus slept calmly, Nell Gibson had returned to her seat at the table, where she regaled herself with another glass of brandy. The effects of the liquor which she had imbibed so copiously, soon exhibited themselves in a deep drowsiness: and she fell fast asleep in a sort of nook or recess where the table stood. So sound was her slumber that she had not heard the arrival of the Hangman's party—nor even the noise of the outrage upon the Baronet in the room below: but when the door of the upper chamber was burst open by Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling, Nell Gibson awoke from her nap.

In the dulness and drowsiness which hung about her after so insufficient an amount of sleep, and with the fumes of liquor still obscuring her brain, she did not immediately observe who the persons were thus entering the chamber. But in a few moments her sight grew clearer—her ideas more collected: and rising from her seat, she beheld Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling.

"Ah! what—are you here?" she exclaimed, addressing herself familiarly to the Hangman's mistress: but instantaneously perceiving that this woman carried a knife in her hand, and that her countenance was positively hideous with the distortions and workings of dire passion, Nell Gibson saw that something was wrong: with admirable presence of mind, however, she said, "What is the matter?"

"Who is that girl?" demanded Sally, glancing down towards the fair stranger.

"What do you mean by coming up here to me with that knife in your hand, and with these ferocious looks?" asked Nell Gibson, her own spirit rising and her eyes flashing fire upon the Hangman's mistress.

But before any further words were exchanged between the two women, the Hangman himself, having finished binding the Baronet's limbs, made his appearance in the chamber, and was as much struck as Sally Melmoth and the Foundling had been on observing the sweet girl, who, startled by the sound of angry voices, was now opening her eyes in alarm.

"Here is the traitress!" exclaimed Sally Melmoth, pointing savagely with the knife towards Nell Gibson.

"Traitress! who do you dare call a traitress?" cried the young woman, fortified—or rather rendered desperate—by the brandy she had imbibed so plentifully.

"Ah! we have got your Baronet, Miss Nelly—we have brought him back with us, I can tell you!" exclaimed the Hangman's mistress in a jeering and taunting tone.

A livid paleness overspread Nell Gibson's countenance as she saw that her proceeding of that night with regard to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, was thus positively known: and bold though she naturally was—armed too as she now likewise was with an artificial stimulant—she nevertheless felt her heart sink down completely within her, for she knew full well that *her's* was a treachery which her companions in crime seldom forgave, and the punishment of which was *death!*

"Ah! you see that she is guilty—her looks betray her!" yelled forth the infuriate Sally Melmoth: and raising her knife, she sprang like a tiger-cat towards Nell Gibson, who, cruelly alarmed, fled screaming horribly into the nook where the table stood.

"Do not murder her, Sal!" cried the Hangman, in a voice of thunder, as he seized upon his enraged mistress and threw his arms round her to hold her back, while Jack the Foundling proceeded to wrest the knife from her grasp.

But here we must observe that although only just awakened from a profound slumber, the fair stranger was nevertheless startled into the fullest consciousness by the fearful scene that thus suddenly burst upon her vision. Instantaneously comprehending that instead of being beneath some hospitable roof, she was in a den of murderous miscreants, the affrighted girl sprang up from the bed and rushed to the door. Terror—the keenest, acutest, most poignant terror—gave her wings that made her movements rapid as the lightning-flash: and all her senses being suddenly endowed with the most vivid clearness, in this moment of life or death, it was no wonder if she observed that on the outer side of the chamber-door there was a large bolt. With admirable presence of mind she dashed the door to, and with her taper fingers shot the bolt into its socket: then precipitating herself down the stairs, not knowing what obstacles she might have to encounter, she alighted in the chamber below.

At first it struck her as being empty: but an ejaculation of mingled surprise and entreaty reached her ears—and then her eyes fell upon the Baronet who had just returned to consciousness. Without wasting a single moment in words, the courageous girl proceeded to action: and observing that a cupboard stood open, she threw a rapid glance upon its shelves. A knife was what she sought for—and a knife did she find accordingly. In another instant she was upon her knees, cutting the cords which bound the Baronet's limbs.

It was a moment of awful suspense and excruciating alarm for both. The Hangman was thundering at the door above, evidently dashing himself with all the weight of his form against it,—while the

process of cutting the cords was calculated to occupy nearly a minute. A minute!—Ah! it is nothing in the ordinary events of life: but it is an age—an entire age—when life itself is trembling in the balance or hanging to a thread!

But now the last piece of cord is cut—the bonds fall off the Baronet's limbs—and starting to his feet, he grasps the hand of his fair deliverer with an effusion of gratitude that is in itself a love—a worship—a devotion!

"Away, dear girl—away!" he cried, retaining that fair hand in his own that he might guide her from the hut.

At the same instant the door of the chamber was burst open: but with such fury did the Hangman precipitate himself down the stairs, that missing the steps he fell heavily from top to bottom. To this circumstance, perhaps, did the Baronet and his fair companion owe their safety: for as they darted forth from the hut, plunging into the utter darkness of the night, they had the advantage of the few moments which were lost by Daniel Coffin in picking himself up and trying his limbs to feel if any were broken. Then forth he sped in pursuit of the fugitives,—Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling remaining behind him to keep guard over Nell Gibson.

Sir Douglas proceeded at random as he guided his fair companion, thinking less of taking any special direction than of placing as great a distance as possible between themselves and the hut. Speedily emerging from the thicket, he paused for an instant to listen whether there were any sounds of pursuit; but he could hear nothing save the heart-beatings of that young girl who now clung with apparent exhaustion to his arm.

"We are not pursued," he said in a hurried whisper: "do you think you can walk a little way farther—only a little way?—and then perhaps we shall reach some place of safety."

"Yes—O yes!" she murmured, in a tone that nevertheless was fraught with the accents of desperation. "I feel that I am sinking—and yet I must proceed—our lives depend upon it!"

"Oh! for God's sake, make an effort—make an effort!" whispered the Baronet, in a tone of intense earnestness: and scarcely caring for himself at the moment, he felt as much—yes, as profoundly—for this sweet girl as if she were a beloved sister or one whom he had long loved and who was to become his wife.

They advanced again, his arm thrown round her slender waist to support her; and in this manner they proceeded for about ten minutes. Their eyes, growing accustomed to the deep darkness, enabled them to distinguish the obscure outlines of the path which they were pursuing; and to the joy of the Baronet, he found that they were rapidly nearing the main road. But his fair companion now grew so faint that she clung to him like a dead weight: and he had to carry rather than support her. That sudden flaming up of her courage, her spirit, and her presence of mind in the hut, had led to a reaction which was gradually prostrating her completely; and by the time they emerged from the fields into the high road, the Baronet was made painfully aware that she was fainting in his arms.

At this moment the sounds of rapidly approaching wheels were heard, and coming too in the same direction which they were pursuing. In a few moments the lights of a vehicle appeared; and on the Baronet hailing it, to his joy it proved to be a return post-chaise journeying empty to London.

We need hardly say that he took immediate possession of it, carefully placing his fair companion upon the cushions inside: and on reaching London, she was consigned in a state of alarming exhaustion to the care of the Baronet's housekeeper Mrs. Baines.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE INTERESTING INVALID.

After a profound slumber of some hours' duration, the fair stranger awoke to find herself lying on a comfortable couch, in a handsomely furnished chamber, and with a motherly-looking person standing by the bed-side. The heavy curtains were drawn over the windows, and the room was darkened evidently for the purpose of preventing the invalid's slumber being disturbed by a glare of light: but through an opening in the drapery stole a golden beam of the sun—and thus the damsel knew that it was broad daylight without.

Then, as a crowd of memories rushed into her brain, a strong shuddering shook her; and it seemed as if some source of ineffable anguish were rending her very heart-strings.

"My poor girl, what ails you?—what do you feel?" asked Mrs. Baines, bending over her and speaking in a tone accompanied with a look of such true maternal kindness that the tears gushed out from the maiden's eyes as if all the founts of her tenderest and deepest feelings were opened. "You have something that troubles you very much, my dear child—something that afflicts you sorely," continued the housekeeper. "I do not ask you to reveal to me your secrets; but remember that you saved the life of my master, Sir Douglas Huntingdon; and therefore, through a feeling of gratitude—if for no other motive—am I anxious and ready to do anything to serve you."

The fair girl gazed up with a look of unspeakable feeling at Mrs. Baines; and then her lips moved as if a revelation were wavering upon them; but whether it were so or not the good woman could not precisely tell. At all events, before the invalid had time to utter a word, the door opened and Dr. Copperas entered the room.

"Ah! here is the doctor," whispered Mrs. Baines to the invalid: then turning towards the physician, she said, "I am glad you have come, sir—for this poor dear girl here seems dreadfully exhausted."

"Well, Mrs. Baines, we shall soon put her to rights," said the physician, seating himself by the bedside and proceeding to feel the damsel's pulse. "Sir Douglas sent for me three or four hours ago—indeed at nine o'clock this morning, I believe——"

"Yes, sir," observed Mrs. Baines: "and now it is past mid-day."

"True: but I was at a consultation with that very remarkable and extraordinary man Doctor Thurston. Indeed, Mrs. Baines, if it were possible to change conditions in this world, and if I

had my choice, I think I would sooner be Doctor Thurston than any one I know."

"Well, sir, this is most singular," observed the housekeeper: "for I remember that about six weeks ago, when our coachman broke his leg and you were out of town at the time, Sir Douglas called in Doctor Thurston, and I recollect that the Doctor whispered to me after he had given his opinion on the case, that it was precisely one which *you*, sir, ought to have superintended."

"Did he though? Well, that is very remarkable," cried Doctor Copperas, affecting to be quite amazed: then turning to the fair stranger, he said, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon has just explained to me all the incidents of the preceding night so far as they relate to himself. Had you been long in that hut whence you both escaped so marvellously?—and had you been ill-treated during your stay there?"

"I had not been there, sir, more than an hour or two," was the answer, "when the incidents occurred which led to our escape; and I certainly received no harsh nor severe treatment:"—then, after a short pause, the damsel continued to observe, "I had taken my place on the outside of the night-coach for Dover—it was upset on Shooter's Hill—and I must have been stunned by the fall, for I remember nothing more until I awoke in that hut."

"Excuse the question I am about to ask," said Doctor Copperas. "Had you previously been suffering from privations or sorrows?"

But the damsel suddenly burst into tears; and the physician, although by no means of tender disposition, was touched by this eloquent yet silent response to his query.

"Ah! poor girl—exhaustion—general debility—too great excitement—fearful reaction," muttered the doctor to himself. "Well, you will be taken care of here; and I shall come and see you again

in the evening. Now, Mrs. Baines, pen, ink, and paper, if you please, and draw the curtain a little."

The housekeeper hastened to obey these instructions; and Doctor Copperas proceeded to write the prescription, observing as he did so, "that he felt convinced he was about to adopt the very same treatment which that eminent and remarkable man Doctor Thurston would have recommended had he been called in."

Having concluded his Esculapian hieroglyphics, he turned towards the bed, saying in a bland tone of inquiry, "And now, what is the name of my interesting patient?"

At the instant that the doctor began the first words of his question, the damsel's cheeks were colourless as alabaster: but scarcely had the final syllables fallen from his lips, when all the blood in her veins seemed to rush to her countenance, suffusing it with the deepest crimson.

"Ah! my dear child," cried Mrs. Baines, "if the Doctor has said anything indiscreet, do not annoy yourself. God knows you can bear no more excitement! I am sure when you were brought home here at three o'clock this morning, in such a state of exhaustion that you could not speak, and your very reason seemed to be abandoning you ——But, heavens!" ejaculated the housekeeper, suddenly interrupting herself as a fresh torrent of tears now gushed out from the poor girl's eyes: "what ails you, my dear child—what ails you?"

The damsel could however give no response, even if she wished to do so: her voice was lost in deep and suffocating sobs;—but looking up with an expression of ineffable gratitude upon her countenance, she took Mrs. Baines's hand and pressed it to her lips.

"There, there," said Doctor Copperas, "I am afraid I said something indiscreet: but I would not wound the poor girl's feelings for the world. As for the prescription, I have made it out in the name of *Miss Smith*, which by the bye is the name that in similar circumstances is invariably adopted by that ornament of the profession, Doctor Thurston."

Doctor Copperas now took his leave; and when he was gone Mrs. Baines addressed the invalid in the kindest and most endearing manner that she could possibly adopt: for the housekeeper was indeed an excellent-hearted and worthy woman; and though in the service of a master renowned for his dissipated habits and rakish conduct, she herself was of unimpeachable respectability.

"Now, my dear girl," she said, bending over the couch and whispering with soothing softness of tone in the invalid's ear, "you have some secret grief which is gnawing at your very heart's core. I do not ask you to tell me what it is: but I *do* ask you to tell me if there is anything that can be done to alleviate it. Should you choose to trust me, you would find that I would go fifty miles to serve you, but not raise a finger to injure you. I saw plain enough that you did not like to mention your name; but I am sure that if there is any harm attached thereto, it is not you yourself who have brought the stain upon it. No—there is innocence in your looks—the candour of purity upon your brow—Ah! and the manner in which you now regard me proves that I am right in believing you to be the dear good girl I hoped and wished the first instant I saw you. But even if you *had* done anything wrong, there is forgiveness to be obtained. Oh! now I see again, by that deprecating look so softly earnest, that it is not so. No—you are all that is good—I am certain you are. Tell me, then, dear child, what can be done for you: and recollect that my master owes you so deep a debt of gratitude, there is no trouble he would shun and no expense he would spare to render you a service and lighten your heart of the load of affliction."

"My kindest, best friend," exclaimed the invalid, throwing her arms around the neck of the good housekeeper, "I will tell you everything. Yes—I will tell you all: and then you will comprehend wherefore I am unhappy—why I am tortured with a devouring suspense—and also why I hesitated to mention a name which nevertheless, God knows, has never been disgraced by *me*. But Oh! before I commence my narrative—let me beg of you—let me implore you to grant me a boon——"

"Speak, dear child!" exclaimed the housekeeper: "what is it?"

"Will you procure me a newspaper of to-day?" said the fair stranger in a low soft tone, as if she even hesitated to solicit so trifling a favour.

"In a moment," cried Mrs. Baines: and disappearing from the room for a short time, she returned with a morning journal, saying, "Sir Douglas always takes this newspaper, and therefore it was handy in the house at the moment."

But while she was thus speaking, the invalid, with a sudden access of frenzied excitement, had snatched—or indeed, rather torn the journal from the matron's hand; and sitting up in the bed, as if that feverish excitement had nerved her with sudden strength, she ran her eye over the columns with the breathless suspense and excruciating uncertainty of one who is about to behold the clearing up of a matter of life or death.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, "he is safe!"

Then, as if this sudden acquirement of a certainty and abrupt term to a harrowing suspense, were to be followed by a re-action proportionately strong and painful, she fell back in a state of utter prostration alike of mind and body. Mrs. Baines hastened to administer a cordial and apply other restoratives: but hours elapsed, and evening was drawing its veil of obscurity over the hemisphere, before the invalid had so far recovered as to be enabled to converse again. Then with only a few brief words of preface, to the effect that she yearned to unbosom the secrets that lay heavy upon her soul, the poor girl poured forth her revelations to the friendly ear of the matron.

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Two hours later—indeed, at about nine o'clock that same evening—Mrs. Baines and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were closetted together in earnest deliberation.

"Ariadne Varian," said the Baronet, repeating the words several times. "How prettily the name sounds: it is really most appropriate for such a charming creature. Do you know, Mrs. Baines, that I really feel —— But no matter," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself.

"Ah! sir, I know what you were going to say," observed the housekeeper: "and really if you

would not think it rude nor unbecoming on my part, I should so earnestly advise you to think of marriage ——"

"Well, well," said the Baronet, laughing; "I suppose I must think of it some day or another. But let me read over again this paragraph relative to poor Ariadne's brother; and then you shall tell me at full length and in detail, all those incidents that you have gleaned from her lips and which you have as yet only sketched so briefly to me."

"Please to read the passage aloud, sir," said Mrs. Baines: "for I only glanced hurriedly over it just now."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly took up the newspaper and read aloud the ensuing passage:—

"It will be in the recollection of our readers that at the last sessions of the Old Bailey, a respectable-looking and genteel young man, named Theodore Varian, was sentenced to transportation for seven years for embezzling monies and falsifying accounts while in the service of Mr. Emmerson, the well known stock-broker of Birchin Lane. On the trial, it will be borne in mind, the young man pleaded guilty, and told a somewhat pathetic tale relative to having made free with his master's money to pay debts contracted during a beloved sister's illness. Up to this point the sympathy of the whole court had been evidently in his favour; but it will be remembered that he proceeded to accuse Mr. Emmerson of having held out threats and made infamous proposals relative to his sister. As a matter of course, Mr. Emmerson indignantly denied the imputation; and the learned Recorder, to whom Mr. Emmerson's high character in the City is of course well known, told the prisoner very plainly that all previous sympathy excited in his behalf, was not merely destroyed, but was succeeded by loathing and contempt for this base endeavour to calumniate his employer. Hence the severe sentence of seven years' transportation which his lordship deemed it right to pass upon the prisoner.

"We have recapitulated these facts which were before published in our columns, in order to remind our readers of the artful cunning and unprincipled disposition of this young man, whose external appearance and genteel manners at first enlisted so much sympathy in his favour. And if any farther proof were wanted of the right estimate which the learned Recorder formed of his consummate duplicity, such proof will be found in the occurrence we are about to relate. In a word, this Theodore Varian escaped from Newgate last night in a very remarkable manner. It appears that during the day the order had been received for the removal of himself and other convicts to Woolwich, preparatory to their departure for the penal settlement. As the order arrived suddenly, the convicts were permitted to see their friends until a late hour last evening; and it is remembered by the gaol authorities that Theodore Varian was visited by his sister, who was clad in an ample cloak. At nine o'clock the bell rang as a signal for all visitors to depart; and as there were some fifty or sixty strangers, male and female, at the time, it is supposed that Varian must have suddenly slipt on his sister's cloak, and probably a bonnet and veil which it would have been easy for her to conceal under that cloak. At all events, shortly after the strangers had departed, Theodore Varian was missed; and the above explanation is the only solution that can be given as to the mode of escape. Up to the hour of going to press, we have not heard of his recapture."

"And the conjecture, then, relative to the method of the escape, is the right one," said the Baronet, as he laid down the newspaper. "But you must now give me all the details of Ariadne's narrative."

"With much pleasure, sir," replied Mrs. Baines. "It appears that Theodore and Ariadne are orphans, and that they entertain the sincerest affection for each other—an affection not only natural in consequence of the ties of brother and sister, but also strengthened by the keen appreciation of that orphan lot which they have together endured from childhood. It is true that Theodore self-appropriated some of Mr. Emmerson's money; and I feel confident it is also true that the hard-hearted, griping, greedy citizen *did* tell the unhappy Theodore that if within three days he did not prepare his sister to surrender her honour, the worst should ensue. This was towards the close of September; and for the three following days Ariadne says that her poor brother seemed to be frenzied with grief. It was not until the third night that he revealed to his sister the horrors of his position and the deeper infamy into which Emmerson tried to plunge them both. Ariadne was at first distracted: but in a short time the natural strength of her character enabled her to speak with calmness upon the position in which herself and unhappy brother were involved. To be brief, they saw no alternative but flight;—and having hastily disposed of everything saleable, and thus reduced the amount of their worldly possessions to the compass of two small bundles containing changes of raiment, they fled from the metropolis."

"Poor orphans!" said the Baronet, in a low tone and with an involuntary sigh. "But go on, Mrs. Baines—go on."

"They got a lift in some vehicle as far as Hounslow, where they passed the night. In the next room to the one where Varian slept, two persons of evidently queer character were lodged; and not being aware that the partition was so thin as it was, they conversed unrestrainedly. Theodore could not help hearing every word they said; and he found that they were two highwaymen. They were boasting of their exploits; and from what they said it appeared that there was always a much better chance of an offender against the laws concealing himself in London than in any country districts. In fine, their discourse made such an impression upon Theodore, that he resolved to retrace his way to the capital. In the morning he communicated to his sister all he had overheard, and the resolution he had formed in consequence; and accordingly, when night came again they returned to London. Hiding themselves in a garret in some low neighbourhood, they passed a fortnight in a state of continual terrors, apprehensions, and alarms. They also lived most frugally—even miserably—in order to eke out their scanty resources. Poor orphans! how often and often must their tears have been mingled as they thought of the present and the past, but dared not look forward to the future! Oh! it makes my heart bleed to think what this dear sweet girl must have suffered. Is it not shocking, sir, that such a heavenly creature—such an angelic being—should be doomed to know such bitter affliction? Only fancy those soft azure eyes weeping such bitter tears—only fancy those lovely pale cheeks, just like damask, being scalded with floods of anguish!—Ah! and fancy too, that those lips which look like rose-buds, should ever wreath otherwise than in the sunniest smiles."

"Mrs. Baines, you are growing quite poetical," said the Baronet, who was in reality deeply affected. "Come, pray proceed," he observed hurriedly: "you were telling me how this poor girl

and her brother lived for a fortnight in that wretched garret. Psha!" he suddenly cried: "what the deuce is the meaning of this ?"—and he dashed a tear from his eye.

"Shall I give you a glass of wine, sir?" asked Mrs. Baines, perceiving that he was profoundly touched, and thinking that he required something to console him.

"No—not a drop, I thank you—I never was less in a humour to drink in my life," he exclaimed. "Pray go on."

"Well sir, at the end of that fortnight the young man resolved to make an endeavour to find employment under another name. He accordingly went out to seek for such employment; but as several hours passed and he did not return, poor Ariadne could no longer restrain the terrors that were devouring her. She rushed forth wildly to seek for him—to make inquiries after him: and she soon learnt the fatal truth. He had been arrested—taken before the Lord Mayor—and committed to Newgate! O God! I can enter fully and deeply into the anguish which the poor girl must have experienced as these terrible tidings burst upon her! Of course I need not say that from the day of his arrest to that of his escape, she visited him as often and remained with him as long as the prison regulations would allow. The sessions were being held at the time when he was arrested; and he was tried a few days after. This was a month ago. You have seen, sir, by the newspaper that he pleaded guilty, and that he was condemned to seven years' transportation. If he had not told the truth about Emmerson's infamous proposa's, he would perhaps only have had two years' imprisonment: but because he boldly endeavoured to unmask the villain, the Judge threw aside all sympathy."

"You see, Mrs. Baines, Emmerson is a man of wealth," observed the Baronet,—"a man of high standing in the City—a member of the Common Council, too—and what is more, a staunch Tory. Besides which, he has got a splendid house at Clapham; and no doubt the Recorder frequently dines with him. So you perceive it is easy to account for the Judge's behaviour on the bench in Theodore Varian's case. But now for the rest of your narrative."

"A few more words will conclude it, sir," said Mrs. Baines. "From the moment of Varian's condemnation, he and his sister never lost an opportunity of discussing the possibility of his escape. The hope of effecting this alone sustained them. Ariadne tells me that she has lain awake whole nights, pondering upon the chances for and against such a consummation. She says that for hours and hours her thoughts have never wandered away from this one subject. At length the plan was settled;—and yesterday was the day for carrying it into execution. Having half-starved herself to eke out her scanty resources, the poor girl had just sufficient to enable her to pay her own coach-fare to Dover, and afford her brother a few shillings to purchase food during his journey thither. The newspaper tells you how the escape was accomplished. No sooner did Ariadne find that the project had succeeded, and that her brother, disguised in the cloak and bonnet, was safe outside the terrible doors of Newgate, than she almost went mad with the delirium of joy. But she was compelled to part immediately from Theodore, for fear of exciting suspicion and affording a trace for pursuers: and while he set off on foot on his journey to Dover, the young maiden took her place outside the night-coach. Of course their ultimate intention was to escape over to France, the captain of one of the boys plying between Dover and Calais being well acquainted with the Varians and well disposed towards them. In conclusion, sir," added Mrs. Baines, "let me observe that when poor Ariadne entreated for a sight of the newspaper, it was to ascertain whether her brother had got safe away or had been re-captured after she parted from him."

"And you have got the exact address where she was to meet her brother at Dover?" said the Baronet inquiringly.

"I wrote it down on this slip of paper, from Ariadne's own lips," responded Mrs. Baines: "and here it is."

"Well, I wonder now whether that fellow James is ready to take his departure," cried the Baronet, looking at his watch. "It is nine o'clock."

But at this moment the door opened; and the valet James made his appearance, muffled up as for a journey.

"Now, James," said Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a serious tone, "I can of course rely upon you, as this matter is one not only of delicacy but also most confidentially sacred. You will travel with all possible speed to Dover; and there you will seek this address," continued the Baronet, placing the slip of paper in the servant's hands. "You will ask for *Theodore Varian*: and when you mention the name of *Ariadne* as a pass-word you will obtain access to this same Theodore. You will then give him this purse; and urge him to lose no time in escaping to Calais. Tell him that his sister has found kind friends in London—and that moreover measures will be taken to obtain a free pardon for himself. You may add that in the course of a day or two his sister will write to him full particulars, addressed to the Post-Office in Calais."

The Baronet placed a heavy purse in the hands of his faithful servant, who forthwith took his departure in a post-chaise for Dover: and the moment he was gone Mrs. Baines returned to Ariadne's chamber. The fair invalid was just awaking from a deep slumber, in which the good housekeeper had left her ere now:—and the assurance that the messenger had departed to meet her brother at Dover, relieved her gentle breast of its chief anxiety. Doctor Copperas presently paid her another visit, and declared that she was going on as favourably as he could expect, adding aside to Mrs. Baines, "that he did not think she could have progressed better since midday, even if under the care of that eminent and distinguished man, Doctor Thurston."

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE RAKE AND THE RAKE'S VICTIM.

SCARCELY had Mrs. Baines quitted the apartment where she had been conversing with the Baronet, when a domestic entered to state that a female desired to speak with him upon important business. Not knowing who she might be, and never refusing a female visit, Sir Douglas Huntingdon ordered her to be admitted. A woman, somewhat flaunting-

dressed and with a dark veil over her countenance, was shown in: but the instant she crossed the threshold, and even before she raised the veil, the Baronet guessed who she was. Nor was he mistaken: for advancing towards him, she lifted her veil and disclosed the features of Nell Gibson.

"Ah! I am glad you are come—I am delighted to see you are safe and sound," he exclaimed, with the most unaffected sincerity. "But, good heavens! how did you escape from those murderous wretches? I have been tortured with the cruellest alarms concerning you. At one moment I was resolved to give information at Bow Street of all that had occurred: but then I feared that if you had really escaped after all, I should only be compromising you — and *that*, for many reasons, you are well aware I would not do for the world. Besides which, I felt assured that if you escaped the dangers and the violence that were imminent at the moment I left the hut, you would escape altogether."

While the Baronet was giving vent to these rapidly uttered expressions. Nell Gibson seated herself near the fire, and gazed upon him with a species of tender interest that seemed strange indeed with one who led such a life and possessed such a heart as she.

"And how knew you," she said, in a gentle and even tremulous voice, "that such dangers menaced me?"

"In the first place because I discovered, when it was too late, that I had revealed to a set of miscreants the kindness you had shown towards me," answered the Baronet;—"I mean that man, that woman, and that youth whom I accompanied back to the hut. Moreover, when I recovered my senses while bound hand and foot in the room below, I overheard the accusation of '*traitress*' levelled against yourself, and then your piercing screams. Ah! Ellen, I can assure you that those screams have rung in my ears ever since!"

"And the young girl whom you brought away with you?" said Nell Gibson, inquiringly.

"Oh! she is safe and will be taken care of," returned the Baronet. "But wherefore was she borne to the hut?"

"Do not ask me," said Nell Gibson. "For no good, you may be sure! Ah! you do not appear satisfied with what I say? Well then, it was to make her as bad as I am."

"Enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon, with a shudder; and then he fixed his eyes upon Nell Gibson, as if to scrutinize thoroughly her entire appearance.

"Ah! you may well look at me," she cried in a tone of bitterness: "I am no doubt changed since first you knew me. That was four years ago. I was then a merry laughing girl of between fifteen and sixteen—yes, and an innocent girl too——"

"Do not think of the past, Ellen," said the Baronet, scarcely able to suppress a sigh as he mentally compared the young woman as she *now* appeared with the young girl as she *was* a few years back. "You last night perilled your life to save mine: tell me, then, what can I do for you?"

"You will give me the hundred guineas for this letter," she said, producing the one which he had written at the hut. "That is all I ask of you—and it will be the means of saving my life."

"Can you fear for a moment that I shall hesitate?" exclaimed the Baronet. "I will give you the hundred guineas wherewith to appease those vile men; and I will give you another hundred guineas—aye, or even three or four hundred, for yourself."

"No—not a shilling—not a farthing," said Nell Gibson, firmly and decisively. "Since the day I left you, never, never have I sought succour at your hand: and I would sooner perish—yes, perish miserably—than receive such succour from *you!*"

"But wherefore, Ellen?" said the Baronet, in amazement. "There is something unnatural—something perverse in this."

"No—it is natural enough, if you do but understand the mind of a woman. Since I left you I have endured many and many privations: I have known what it is to want bread—aye, I have known what it is to feel starvation! Or else do you think, if it had not been through some desperate necessity, I should ever have fallen into the company in which you found me last night? But even when perishing as it were with famine, I never once applied to *you*."

"But you were wrong, Ellen—you were wrong," said the Baronet. "Whatever had occurred, my purse would always have been open to you."

"Oh! yes—I knew *that;* and it was the thought of your kindness that stung me to the very quick. And therefore, so far from being wrong," she exclaimed, suddenly assuming a proud look that for a moment rendered her really and truly handsome—"so far from being in the wrong," she repeated, "I was in the right: for although fallen so low and become so debased, degraded, and vile, I still had my own little feelings of pride——"

"With what wretched sophistry have you deluded yourself!" interrupted the Baronet. "Was I not your seducer?—did I not inflict the most terrible wrong upon you which selfish man can possibly perpetrate towards confiding woman?"

"Aye—if we had always stood in the light of *seducer* and *victim*," said Nell Gibson, "it would have been different. *Then* I should have had a claim upon you, and would not have hesitated to assert it. But if *you* inflicted the first wrong upon *me*, I subsequently inflicted another upon *you*. I proved faithless to you when you loved me so well and cherished me so fondly: I deceived you most grossly—and there was something vile—yes, beyond all expression vile, in my conduct when I robbed and plundered you to expend the proceeds of my iniquity upon a paramour. Well then, instead of remaining your victim I became a wrongdoer towards you: and every claim that I might have possessed upon your consideration was forfeited. Yes—I felt all this; and again I tell you that I would sooner have died—aye, have perished miserably—than have received as the pittance of charity, that which once came from a noble bounty! Rather would I have sunk down through famine, than have obtained from your pity that which I once received from your fondest love! Besides, when I left you I was clothed in silk and satin—and no earthly consideration would have induced me reappear before you in the rags of beggary."

"But still," observed the Baronet, much moved by the language which thus poured with such undoubted sincerity from the young woman's lips—

"but still in the depths of your soul remained a certain fondness and affection for me: otherwise you would not have perilled your life to save mine last night."

"Listen to me," exclaimed Nell Gibson; "and I will unfold to you the maze and mysteries of a woman's heart—not merely of one woman, nor of my heart alone—but the feeling which is peculiar to us all! In the bosom of the vilest, most degraded, and most crime-stained of the unfortunate women whom the lust of man or the iron sway of poverty has flung upon the streets,—yes, in the bosom of even the foulest, lowest, and vilest prostitute, there is one small sanctuary in which an image is treasured up as the idol of a worship: and this is the image of the seducer! In retrospecting over years of crime, the unfortunate woman carries her recollections back to the period of her girlhood and her first virgin love. Even though it was the love which robbed her of that virginity and steeped her in disgrace, it is nevertheless the one bright spot in her chequered career. Yes—if we look back through a vista of rags, and filth, and poverty, and wretchedness, and crime, still do we behold at the beginning that bright and sunny period when hopes were golden and the heart gushed forth with all the freshest feelings of youth. Then is it that the image of the loved one—though perhaps no longer loved—is reproduced vividly to the memory: nor is he thought of as a mere seducer—no, nor is that past spring-tide of joy looked back upon as the very source whence all subsequent pollutions have flowed. Now, then, do you understand me? Since I fled from you I have received the embraces of many many men—I have been glad to sell myself for gold or for silver;—I have given myself up to suitors in moments of sensuality;—at other times, almost without passion and without impulse, I have abandoned myself to strangers through mere profligacy. And yet, though thus drinking the cup of vice to the very dregs, and dragging myself as it were through all kinds of moral filth and pollution, there has still always been one image that I have cherished in the sanctuary of my heart, and which no stains of vice nor shades of misery could possibly efface. That image is *yours*: and you are the only living being for whom I would have perilled my life last night, or would peril it again! Nay—had you been any other person, I should have seen you killed without pity and without remorse."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had listened in speechless amazement to this address, which the young woman delivered with an impressive seriousness that precluded all doubt as to her sincerity. Besides which, her actions at the hut had fully proven the existence of that sentiment with regard to her seducer which she now explained: and as with rapid glance the Baronet's mental vision swept over the past he comprehended full well how such a state of feeling as that which she had described, could be.

Four years had elapsed since he had first encountered Ellen Gibson upon one of his estates in a distant county. Her parents were dead: she had no relatives, but was living with friends. Her education had been tolerably well cared for: indeed, she had been reared in a manner above her means or her expectations. The Baronet saw her and loved her: and she loved him in return. Marriage was not spoken of between a man of rank and wealth and a young girl of rustic parentage: but she became his mistress. He brought her to London—lodged her in a sumptuous mansion—gave her carriages, horses, servants—in fine, all the luxuries and elegancies of life. But she soon formed other connexions; and her profligacy, developing itself with remarkable suddenness, hurried her away with a sort of frenetic speed. Sir Douglas discovered her infidelity, and wrote to remonstrate—even offering her forgiveness: for he was infatuated with her at the time. But instead of answering his note, she sold off the entire contents of the mansion, the carriages, horses, even to his own plate which she had with her at the time: and taking her departure, she lavished the produce upon a paramour who had not a single quality, personal, mental, or social, that could compare with those of the Baronet. Since that period her career had been one of those rapid downward ones which furnish so many a history of female crime: and therefore seeing what she now was, and what she once had been, Sir Douglas Huntingdon could scarcely feel astonished if from the dark depths of her present position she occasionally cast wistful, longing, and even loving eyes backward upon that epoch which formed the brightest page in her life's history.

"But wherefore," he said, after a long pause, "should you go back to those dreadful men? Tell me—would you like to abandon the sort of existence you are now leading?"

"God knows I would!" returned the young woman, in a voice expressive of the deepest feeling. "But it is impossible—it is impossible!" she immediately added, shaking her head, while an expression of unutterable despair swept over her countenance.

"Why impossible?" demanded the Baronet, in amazement: "can you not to-morrow if you choose retire into some agreeable seclusion? What if I were to go early in the morning and take a nice respectable lodging for you——"

"Oh! no, no—it is impossible!" interrupted Nell Gibson, impatiently. "You are not aware—you cannot imagine how difficult it is to extricate one's-self from the meshes of crime——"

"Do you mean to tell me," said the Baronet, contemplating the young woman in dismay,—"solemnly and seriously tell me, that you are so inveterately wedded to this shocking course of life——"

"My God! no—ten thousand times no!" interrupted Nell Gibson, a sort of agony sweeping over her features. "Have I not told you that I would abandon this wretched, wretched mode of life if I could? And, oh! words have no power to tell the deep, deep horror—the intense loathing—which I at times feel for such an existence. Ere now I spoke of my depravities, and I said that often when neither tempted by gold or prompted by passion, I flung myself into the embraces of the merest strangers. Well, perhaps if I had described my humour on such occasions as the recklessness of *despair*, instead of the wantonness of sheer *depravity*, I should have been nearer the mark. Yes—to drive away thought I must always have some kind of excitement. I hate brandy; but I drink it often and often—I feel that it hardens me. I am always ready to do anything wrong—aye, even to commit unnecessary or unprofit-

able crimes, sooner than do nothing: and for the same reason do I seek the excitement of all possible profligacies. By these means do I expel *thought*, and thus manage to maintain a calm and even happy exterior."

"But wherefore, I again ask," said the Baronet, "should you not abandon this course of life if you wish? Wherefore return to those horrible companions?"

"Because I am so utterly and completely in their power," answered the young woman. "Wherever I might hide myself, they would seek me out:—aye, even did I fly to the ends of the earth, they would pursue me—they would discover my retreat—they would murder me! When once a person gets deep in with such companionship, it is impossible to extricate one-self. No—it cannot be done. You see how completely I am in the power of those wretches, by coming here for these hundred guineas to propitiate them."

"Ah! and this reminds me to inquire," said the Baronet, "how you saved yourself from their fury, and what colouring you gave to the adventure."

"That man who enticed you back to the hut, was none other than the Public Executioner," replied Nell Gibson. "There—start not—speak not—what matters it now who he was? I tell you all this, of course being well aware that you will take no advantage of it. The woman who came with him is his mistress: and the lad is his apprentice. Sally Melmoth—that is the woman's name—has long had a spite against me, because she fancies I have been over intimate with her flash man. But no—not for the world! Base and profligate as I know I am, there is a lower depth even than the lowest to which I have sunk: and that is the arms of the public hangman. But to return to last night's affair. The Hangman and the apprentice prevented the infuriate woman from doing me a mischief: and while the Hangman himself burst open the door and rushed after you and the young girl, his mistress and the lad kept guard upon me. Presently the Hangman came back, after a fruitless search: and almost at the same time the other men returned from an equally unavailing hunt after you. They were all savage enough; and I thought that everything was over with me. So I prepared for the worst. The Hangman told the other men how you had sought refuge at the public-house in the bye lane—how you had innocently let slip the admission that you owed your life to me—and how he had enticed you back to the hut to be disposed of as the whole gang should think fit. The man that I am now living with—he who brought you down the writing paper and who is called the Buttoner—then declared that from the first moment he suspected I had given you such information, and this suspicion on his part had been confirmed by the circumstance that I had accidentally let out to that stout man whose name is Bencull, that you were a Baronet, this circumstance proving that I knew you before. All these statements and remarks were made in my presence; and ferocious looks glared upon me from every eye. I saw that nothing but the sudden exertion of all my presence of mind could save me; and I accordingly exclaimed, "*Well I confess that all you have said is true; but the man whose life I have this night saved, was my first love—indeed the only man I ever sincerely and truly did love. I knew it was vain and useless to beg his life at your hands; and therefore I gave him the whispered information which led him to flee. You may kill me if you like; but I would do so over again this moment, in spite of all consequences. That is however no reason why I should betray you in other things; and you know right well that I would not.*"—They were all much struck by these remarks, but more so by the boldness of my manner. I thereupon proceeded to assure them that you would not take any proceedings against them, for fear of compromising me. As a proof thereof, I offered to come to your house to-day and obtain from you these hundred guineas for them. These assurances satisfied the whole party, the Hangman's mistress alone excepted. Three of the men have now accompanied me as far as you door, and are waiting at this moment in the street. You see, therefore," added Nell Gibson, with that calmness which was her *outward* characteristic, "how true I spoke when I declared that it was impossible to escape from the trammels of crime and the meshes of such companionship."

Thus ended the colloquy between this young woman and her seducer. She received the hundred guineas for which she had called: but again did she emphatically decline any boon or gift for herself. The Baronet accompanied her as far as the front door of his house; and standing upon the threshold for a few minutes to look after her, he observed by the light of the lamps that she joined three men at the corner of the street.

"Women are strange creatures!" thought the Baronet to himself, as he retraced his way to his own cheerful fireside.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

MORE PLOTTING AND COUNTER PLOTTING.

THE three men whom Nell Gibson thus joined, were the Buttoner, Bencull, and the Hangman: and passing rapidly away from the fashionable street where Sir Douglas Huntingdon lived, they plunged into a low district in the close vicinity. For be it observed that in London the back windows of the palaces of the rich often look upon the noisome dens where the poor—*their victims*—dwell.

Entering a vile public house, or boozing ken, the three men and Nell Gibson proceeded to the taproom: and as there was no one else there at the time, they were enabled to converse at their ease.

"Now, Nell," said the Buttoner, as soon as an order had been given for some liquor "what news? I suppose you succeeded with your pal, the Baronet."

"Here is the money," she observed, quietly producing gold and Bank-notes for a hundred guineas.

"And you couldn't get no more out of him?" observed Bencull, savagely.

"Not a farthing," answered Nell Gibson. "I had a great deal of difficulty in getting this."

"Then he was deuced ungrateful," said the Hangman, "after all you did for him last night."

"Yes—very," replied the young woman.

"And didn't you learn nothink about that sweet young gal," demanded Bencull.

"Only that Sir Douglas, on ascertaining who she was, restored her to her friends;"—and in giving this answer Nell Gibson was prompted by the same feeling which had inspired her conduct throughout towards the Baronet—namely, to do nothing that should in any way injure or annoy him, but on the contrary anything she could to serve him.

"Well, this *is* perwoking," exclaimed Bencull,—"to lose that young gal after all the trouble I had in getting possession of her! But there's one more question—and that is, whether there's any chance of a safe crack in the Baronet's house?"

"Eh! that's the question," said the Hangman, instinctively tapping his capacious pocket to show that he had his burglarious apparatus concealed about his person.

"I examined the hall well, as I went in and came out," said Nell Gibson; "but I don't think that an entry can be made in that quarter. In fact, I scarce think from what I saw that it would be worth while to attempt it at all."

"Now mind you, I think just the contrary," cried the Hangman, with an oath: for he had been watching Nell Gibson's countenance from under his overhanging brows, and he felt convinced in his own mind that she was doing all she could to shield the Baronet.

"I say let us try the crack," exclaimed the Buttoner, sharing the Hangman's suspicions.

"And I say," added Bencull, "that if I do it alone, it shall be done. There's a coach-house and stable adjoining the Baronet's mansion: and we can easy get through that way to the back of the premises. Then, when once at the back of a house, I should like to see the doors or windows that would keep me out."

"Well then, it's agreed," said the Hangman. "Let me see," he continued, looking at a great silver watch which he pulled from his fob: "it's now half-past ten o'clock. We will wait here till twelve—and that shall be the hour. The lush is good at this ken, and the landlord knows me."

"Will you stay here, then, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner; "or go home to Bermondsey and get to bed comfortable, while I stay to do the trick?"

"Just as you like," answered Nell, with apparent indifference: though in her heart she was most anxious to get away at once.

"Well then," said the Buttoner, also affecting the utmost carelessness in the matter, "I should think you had better get home as quick as you can."

"So be it," said Nell Gibson, rising from her seat; then, with a laugh, she observed to her paramour the Buttoner, "Mind in dividing that swag you remember my regulars:"—and she pointed to the money on the table.

"All right, Nell," said the Buttoner: and the young woman then took her departure.

"What did you let her go for?" demanded the Hangman, savagely, the moment the door closed behind her. "Curse me if I don't think she's been playing us false again with this Baronet——"

"That's just my opinion," interrupted the Buttoner, starting from his seat: "and it's cos why I think so that I persuaded her to be off so that I may have an opportunity of watching her. I shall be back at midnight at all events, if not sooner."

Having thus spoken, he turned up the collar of his coat, slouched his hat over his countenance, and then hastened from the boozing-ken. On emerging into the street, he caught a glimpse of Nell Gibson by the light of a lamp, just as she was turning round the corner: and having once got upon the right track, he had no difficulty in keeping her in view,—still leaving such a distance between them as to prevent her from perceiving that she was thus dogged. At first, however, she kept halting, turning round, looking and listening, every two or three minutes: but at length, being perfectly satisfied that there was no watch set upon her, she increased her pace, and made straight for the Almonry in Westminster, which was about a mile from the boozing-ken she had so recently left.

The Almonry is one of those dreadful neighbourhoods where pauperism is most intense, squalor most hideous, demoralization most depraved. It consists chiefly of brothels and such like dens of infamy, and forms part of the domain belonging as an endowment to Westminster Abbey! But inasmuch as loathsome hot-beds of vice and moral lazar-houses of that kind usually produce a good rent, the Dean and Chapter could not of course think of purging a neighbourhood which yielded them such large revenues.

In the midst of that morass so densely peopled with human reptiles, and exhaling so pestilential an atmosphere, was situated a low boozing-ken known as Meg Blowen's crib. It differed from Bencull's establishment in Jacob's Island, inasmuch as it had not the appearance of a private dwelling, but was open like any other public-house, and had a large room on the ground-floor always filled at night with the viles t of the vile and the lowest of the low.

To this place did Nell Gibson wend her way,—the Buttoner still following at a distance. Entering the establishment, she tarried for a few minutes in the public room to exchange some friendly observations with her acquaintances there: and having thus dispensed her courtesies to the leading members of the gang, she passed into Meg Blowen's—that is to say, the landlady's—private room behind the bar. If we follow her thither and peep in at her proceedings, we shall observe that she requested to be furnished with pen, ink, and paper; and having written a letter, she summoned into her presence a lad whom she believed to be the most trustworthy amongst the juvenile portion of reprobates there assembled. Making him secure about his person the letter which she had written, she bade him hasten and deliver it at an address which she named, and to depart from the house the moment he placed the letter in the hands of the servant answering the door. Having thus explicitly given her instructions, she placed five shillings in the lad's hands: and he set forth with great glee to execute his commission.

But to return to the Buttoner, we must observe that on seeing Nell Gibson enter Meg Blowen's he was more than ever convinced she had some artifice in view: and looking through the window, he first saw her converse with her acquaintances in the public room, and then pass into the private parlour behind the bar. He next saw Meg Blowen reach down the pen and ink from a shelf, take a sheet of paper out of a drawer, and then carry these writing materials into the parlour. It would have struck any individual even

far less astute than the Buttoner, that Nell Gibson was going to send a written communication somewhere: and he therefore remained intently upon the watch. In a few minutes he saw Nell Gibson appear at the door of the parlour, cast her eyes searchingly around upon the motley assemblage, and select one of the lads. The youth thus singled out was (as already stated) summoned by her into the parlour; and in a short time he reappeared. But instead of rejoining his companions at the table in the public room, he at once issued forth from the establishment.

The Buttoner followed him until they were at a convenient distance from the place: then looking back and perceiving the coast was clear, he overtook the boy, and clutching him by the collar, said, in a fierce tone, "Now, my lad, a word with you."

"Holloa! Mister Buttoner," exclaimed the youth, catching a glimpse of the man's countenance by the light gleaming from a window. "What do you mean by stopping me like this here?"

"Oh! you know me, do you, young feller?" cried the Buttoner. "Well, so much the better: we shall sooner come to an understanding. Now then, you have nothing to fear; because I shall let you keep whatever the young woman has just given you, and I will give you double myself into the bargain."

"Well, she gived me a guinea," said the boy, prompt with a lie and ready with a cheat.

"Wery good," observed the Buttoner. "Then of course you can show it me?"

"Won't you take a genelman's word?" asked the lad impudently.

"No nonsense," responded the Buttoner, bestowing a hearty shake upon the youth. "Come, show us what Nell Gibson gave yer—and I'll double it."

"Well, by goles! it's turned into a crown," said

the boy, producing a five-shilling piece. "It's the reg'lar counterfeit crank she's come over me!"

"Nonsense," interrupted the Buttoner: then pulling a handful of silver from his pocket, and counting out ten shillings, he said, "Now give me the letter you've got about you—walk about for half-an-hour or so—and go back and tell the young woman that you've done her commission quite faithful."

The ten shillings chinked in the boy's hand—the Buttoner grasped the letter—and they separated,—the latter returning to the boozing-ken where he had left the Hangman and Bencull. In a few hasty words he explained to them all that had occurred; and on opening the letter, which was addressed to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, the contents were found to be as follow:—

"Look well to your premises to-night. A burglary is contemplated by some of the men you saw at the hut on Shooter's Hill. I said all I could to prevent this further annoyance towards you; but I could not succeed in staving it off. I am very much afraid that they suspected I was playing a part; if so, all these causes of suspicion will make it go hard with me sooner or later. But no matter: whatever is to happen must take its course. I would have come back to warn you of the attempt that will be made; but I am so fearful that one of the men might go and watch the street. So I prefer writing, and have found a trusty messenger. I think the men will enter by the coach house and get round to the back of the premises; but you must keep watch at all points. One thing however I conjure you—that is not to adopt any means to take them into custody, nor yet to do them any unnecessary hurt: only just to defend and protect yourself. This is most likely the last time you will ever hear of or from

"ELLEN."

The rage of the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, on reading this epistle, may be better conceived than described. Daniel Coffin muttered such awful threats against the young woman, that if his two companions had not been kindred fiends, their blood would have run cold. But when the first ebullition of their diabolical wrath was expended, they agreed after calmer and cooler deliberation, to conceal for the present their knowledge of this additional treachery on Nell Gibson's part, with a view to ascertain by some means or other whether she were also betraying them in respect to the plot initiated against Larry Sampson.

By the time this resolution was fairly discussed and adopted by the three villains, the Hangman's watch showed that it was midnight. They accordingly tossed off bumpers of brandy to drink success to their undertaking; and thus inspired with a more than natural amount of brute courage, they repaired in the direction of Sir Douglas Huntingdon's mansion.

Although the street where the house was situated was a fashionable one, it was no great thoroughfare; and by the aid of the Hangman's skeleton keys the coach-house door was soon opened. The three ruffians, having thus let themselves into this portion of the establishment, locked the door behind them, and then proceeded to light a "darkey," or lantern, which also formed part of the invariable tackle of a cracksman. In the rear of the coach-house were the stables, in which there were several horses; and there was a door behind, leading into a yard at the back of the house. The three burglars accordingly entered the stable for the purpose of passing through by the way described: but two of the horses exhibited such manifestations of terror by kicking and plunging, as if instinctively aware of the presence of intruders, that a groom who slept in a chamber above the coach-house was aroused from his repose.

Leaping from his bed, and arming himself with a pair of pistols, the groom sprang down the ladder leading to his chamber: but he was instantaneously seized by the three burglars, against whom he made a desperate resistance. The lantern was dashed out of the Hangman's hand, and the glass broken against the wall: it then fell upon a heap of straw, the light remaining unextinguished. The same blow which dashed the lantern from Coffin's hand knocked him violently down; and he lay half-stunned upon the floor for nearly a minute, during which Bencull and the Buttoner succeeded in overpowering the groom.

"Let's give him his gruel, Ben," cried the Buttoner, as they both dashed the unfortunate man with all their strength against the wall; so that he groaned heavily once, and then fell—lying motionless, either dead or else stunned beyond all hope of recovery.

But scarcely was this crime accomplished, when the sudden blazing of the straw on which the lantern had fallen, startled the burglars. From the Buttoner's lips burst the cry of "Fire!"—the Hangman, who had just recovered his senses, sprang as if galvanized to his feet;—and Bencull at once began to throw pails of water upon the burning material, there being a pump in the coach-house. But this endeavour to extinguish the flame speedily proving utterly ineffectual, the three burglars were compelled to depart as stealthily and promptly as they could.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not as yet retired to rest. The story which he had heard from the lips of his housekeeper relative to the troubles of Theodore and Ariadne Varian — together with the singular and touching features of his interview with Nell Gibson,—had furnished him with so much food for reflection that he remained sitting by his cheerful fireside, lost in serious meditation. All the rest of the household had retired to their chambers: a profound stillness reigned through the house; and not a sound reached his ears from without. But all on a sudden this dead, deep silence—this awe-inspiring solemnity of the midnight hour—was broken by that most terrible of all alarms, the cry of "Fire!"

Startled from his reflections as if by the voice of doom thundering in his ear, and springing from his seat as if stung by an adder, Sir Douglas Huntingdon rushed from the room and bounded forth to the front door to ascertain whether the alarm were real and where the fire was. In an instant he acquired the dreadful certainty that it was neither a cruel jest nor a false rumour: for the moment he opened the front door, the vivid light flashed upon his eyes, and he beheld the flames bursting forth from the windows of the rooms above the coach-house. Already, too, were crowds hurrying thither—the alarm was spreading to the neighbouring dwellings—and all the usual features of such a scene were manifesting themselves in their variety, confusion, and excitement.

Several persons sprang towards Sir Douglas—some proffering their advice—others demanding

how many people slept in his house, and in which rooms they were. In a moment he was overwhelmed with multitudinous questions and bewildered with conflicting counsels. Then came a couple of watchmen springing their rattles: next appeared three or four hulking fellows bearing along a ladder and knocking down all who got in their way—and all this while the crowd was collecting and the flames were bursting forth with increasing fury.

But Sir Douglas Huntingdon soon recovered his presence of mind: and rushing back into the house he raised the fearful alarm of *fire*, which did not appear as yet to have reached the ears of any inmate save himself. In a few moments all was bustle, confusion, and dismay within the walls of the mansion. Mrs. Baines came rushing down in her night-clothes; and overcome with terror, she fainted in the hall. Some of the other servants soon made their appearance also; and as the flames had now spread from the coach-house to the mansion itself, several active persons amongst the crowd began rapidly to remove all the most portable articles of furniture into the street. The ladder was raised against the front of the house in case of need, to facilitate escape from the upper storeys: and messengers were despatched for a fire-engine.

Meantime the Baronet, struck with horror at the idea that his groom slept over the coach-house, —and having satisfied himself that the other servants were all safe,—rushed to the back of the premises and opened the door leading from the yard to the stable. Several persons followed him: but the instant that stable-door was opened, two or three of the horses sprang madly forth, trampling down those who were in their way. Sir Douglas himself was thus much hurt by one of the affrighted animals: but rushing forward, he sought to penetrate into the stable. A volume of flame, bursting forth, drove him back;—and to his horror he heard the piteous sounds of dying agony which proved that several of his horses were perishing in the flames. But the groom—the poor unfortunate groom—where was he? Again did Sir Douglas spring forward in order to penetrate into the coach-house: but again did a volume of smoke drive him back. A third time did he make the attempt;—and now the ceiling of coach-house and stable fell in with a terrific crash; and if two of the men who had followed the Baronet hither had not suddenly pulled him back as they heard the rafters giving way, he would have been buried in the ruins.

For a few moments the flames seemed stifled in this part of the premises: but as a long tongue of fire suddenly shot up, lambent and lurid again, the Baronet observed by the light that the fall of the ceiling had brought down with it a considerable portion of the partition-wall separating the stabling department from the mansion itself. A large portion of the interior of the dwelling-house was thus revealed, including a back-staircase leading up to the bed-chambers.

At this moment the recollection flashed to the Baronet's mind that he had not ere now seen Ariadne Varian amongst the other inmates of the mansion whose safety was assured. Indeed, the poor girl had been forgotten: Mrs. Baines had swooned, as already stated, and had been borne to a neighbour's house where she fell into alarming hysterics: and, on the other hand, Sir Douglas Huntingdon's attention had been mainly directed towards the coach-house and stabling. Thus was it that the only two persons who were likely to think of poor Ariadne, were prevented by circumstances from doing so, until the sudden laying bare of the private staircase to the view of the Baronet, led him to pass in rapid array in his mind every chamber to which that staircase led.

The instant that the image of Ariadne thus flashed to his recollection, he gave utterance to a cry of mingled anguish and despair: then springing forward, he clambered through the vast aperture which the falling in of the partition wall had caused; and he thus gained the interior of the dwelling-house. Passing into the hall, he found his servants and many strangers busy in removing the furniture. He made rapid inquiries concerning Ariadne; but the servants had forgotten her, and the strangers had seen no young damsel answering to her description descend the stairs.

Horrible uncertainty! All the upper part of the house was in a perfect conflagration: the street was as light as if it were daytime;—and one wretched engine was making the most ineffectual attempts to quench the fire. The ladder itself had caught the flames gushing forth from the upper windows. And here we may observe that the crowds augmented: and amongst them were the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, all three hovering about to see what piece of good luck the chapter of accidents might throw in their way.

From all that has been said, hurried and brief though the description be, the reader will understand that the flames had spread like wild-fire in an incredibly short space of time. Catching the chambers above the coach-house, they had thence burst into the mansion, all the upper part of which was now enveloped in a terrific blaze. To ascend therefore to the rooms above, appeared an act of frenzy or of desperation. But Ariadne's life was at stake: and this thought was sufficient to nerve the Baronet with the strength and courage of a thousand!

Retracing his way from the hall to the back staircase, he rushed up it. It was the same as a besieger scaling the walls of a town, while all kinds of igneous missiles and combustibles are showered down upon him. Sir Douglas had literally to ascend through gushing flames and volumes of smoke,—flames that scorched and smoke that blinded: but he was resolved to rescue Ariadne, or perish in the attempt! In a few seconds he reached her chamber-door. Bursting it open, he beheld her lying senseless on the carpet. Through the wainscotted wall the flames were already gushing: the heat was intense—the smoke stifling. In less than a minute the maiden would have been suffocated—whereas she was as yet unscathed by the fire, and had most probably fainted through terror when endeavouring to escape from her room on the first alarm of fire.

To snatch her up in his arms and bear her forth, was the work of a moment. Her head drooped back upon the Baronet's shoulder; and she continued senseless as he rushed with her down the staircase. Rushed indeed!—it was plunging as it were into a fiery furnace: and rapid as the lightning flash did the thought sweep through the Baronet's mind that it would be a miracle if he and his fair burden reached the street in safety. Vast

masses of the partition wall kept falling in; and it seemed as if the whole building were about to give way and bury himself and Ariadne in the smoking, burning ruins. Great pieces of timber—especially rude planks belonging to the lofts above the stables—came crashing down: and thus, in the space of three or four short minutes, did the Baronet and the unconscious Ariadne pass through countless perils of an appalling character. But at length the damsel's brave deliverer reached the foot of the staircase: and as he rushed with his burthen through the hall and appeared with her at the street door, a tremendous shout of applause arose from the assembled multitudes.

At the very instant that Sir Douglas Huntingdon thus reached the threshold of the mansion with the still inanimate Ariadne in his arms, and in the strong glare of the terrific conflagration, the maiden was recognised by Bencull. This discovery of *the fair stranger of the hut* was in a moment communicated by the ruffian in a hurried whisper to the Buttoner and the Hangman: and they all three instinctively pressed forward towards the front-door steps. At that very instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon felt a sudden faintness come over him,—doubtless in consequence of the tremendous excitement as well as painful exertions through which he had just passed.

"Who will take care of this young lady?" he cried, as one of his footmen threw an ample cloak over the half-naked form of Ariadne.

But scarcely were the words spoken by the Baronet, when some large portion of the interior of the mansion fell in with such a terrific crash that the crowd retreated in sudden dismay and with cries of alarm: while those who were removing the furniture, rushed out of the house with such haste that the Baronet was thrown violently forward. In that moment of confusion, Bencull caught Ariadne Varian in his arms: and as if it were written in the book of destiny that circumstances were to favour the ruffian's designs in carrying off the still inanimate maiden, the whole roof of the house fell in at the very instant that he seized upon her. The consequence was that the fire was extinguished, or rather smothered, for the moment as completely as if a deluge of water were poured upon it: and darkness fell upon the scene—a darkness all the more intense through succeeding the glare of the conflagration. Confusion became worse confounded amongst the crowd: and while the whole living mass fell back from the vicinage of the falling house, as the sea sweeps away from the shore upon which it has just dashed its boiling billows, it was no difficult matter for Bencull to hurry away with Ariadne in his arms. The Hangman and the Buttoner kept close at his heels—an empty hackney-coach was encountered at the corner of the street—and the three villains entered it with their lovely burden.

But when the driver asked whither he was to go, the men were thrown into a sudden perplexity. Bencull, however, hastily whispered, "Didn't Nell Gibson talk of a certain Marquis of Leveson who was Mrs. Gale's best customer?"

"To be sure," whispered the Buttoner. "Why not take her direct to him?"

"Ah! do you think of selling her to that Marquis?" said the Hangman. "Well, I know where he lives—I have been in his house:"—then turning to the coachman who stood at the door, and thrusting some silver into his hand, Daniel Coffin ordered him to drive to Albemarle Street.

In a few minutes the vehicle stopped at the door of Leveson House: and it happened that just at the same moment Brockman, the favourite valet of the Marquis, was entering the mansion. Seeing the hackney coach stop, he inquired of those inside what their business was: and as it was pitch dark within the vehicle, the valet did not observe how villanous were the countenances of the fellows whom he thus addressed.

"The fact is," said the Hangman in a rapid whisper, "we have got a young gal that is intended for his lordship. She's in a fit: and so you can just lift her into the house without fearing any noise—and one of us will call for the recompense the first thing to-morrow morning."

Brockman naturally concluded from this statement that the fellows had been hired by his master, or else by some one in his lordship's interest, to perform this particular service: and he therefore at once consented to receive the maiden without asking another question. The housekeeper who was sitting up for Brockman, was summoned: and with her aid the valet lifted Ariadne out of the coach and carried her into the mansion.

The vehicle then drove away, the three ruffians congratulating themselves not only on having done something to annoy Sir Douglas Huntingdon, whom they regarded as a sort of enemy, but likewise on having adopted so bold a step as to convey the damsel direct to the spot where her charms were marketable, instead of conducting the bargain through the medium of a middle-woman, such as Mrs. Gale. But not for a moment did those ruffians experience the slightest remorse for having caused so terrible a conflagration in that house beneath the ruins of which the charred and blackened remains of the unfortunate groom were indubitably buried.

Meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had been thrown down and stunned by the rush of people from the front door of his mansion, was borne to a neighbour's house, where immediate restoratives were applied. On coming to himself his first inquiry was for Ariadne: but those by whom he was surrounded, could give him no information on the subject. Supposing that she had been taken to some other house in the vicinage, he sallied forth into the street again to make further inquiries on the subject. But neither from his own servants, who were watching over the property removed out of the house—nor from any of the crowd—could he obtain a satisfactory answer. In fact, no tidings could he glean of Ariadne from the moment that he sank down insensible in front of his own door.

Tortured with cruel misgivings, he sped from house to house prosecuting his inquiries, up and down the street—but all in vain. At length he was compelled, through sheer exhaustion, to abandon any farther research for the present, and retire to a neighbouring hotel where he took up his temporary quarters.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

ANOTHER LAMB IN THE LION'S DEN.

On recovering her senses, Ariadne Varian found herself in bed; and sweeping her eyes rapidly around, as a flood of recollections poured in unto her brain, she at once saw that it was not the same chamber which she had occupied at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Handsome as that chamber was, this was far more elegantly furnished, and denoted a more exquisite refinement in taste, or rather in luxury.

A middle-aged woman, looking like a housekeeper, was seated by the bedside: and though the instant Ariadne opened her eyes, this female endeavoured to look kindly and speak soothingly, yet it was not with the same motherly tenderness evinced by Mrs. Baines.

No suspicion of treachery, however, entered Ariadne's mind. Collecting her ideas, she remembered that she had been alarmed with cries of "Fire"—that springing from her couch she had beheld the ominous glare at the window of her chamber—and that the noise of the gathering crowds in the streets had reached her ears. She also recollected that, overcome with terror, she had felt her limbs failing and her strength abandoning her: and as she remembered nothing more until the instant she awoke in this strange apartment where she now found herself, she naturally concluded that her reminescences had been interrupted by a long swoon.

Utterly unaware, therefore, how her life was saved, and who had saved it,—unconscious, indeed of every feature and detail of the terrible conflagration,—her first hurried questions were to inquire where she was, what extent of damage had been done, and whether any lives were lost. Then before even a single one of these queries was answered, she exclaimed with looks and accents of torturing suspense, "Tell me, is Sir Douglas Huntingdon safe?"

The questions so hurriedly and excitedly put were each and all equally puzzling to the Marquis of Leveson's housekeeper, who was even more ignorant than Ariadne herself relative to what had occurred—seeing that she of course did not know who the damsel was, whence she had been brought, or that any particular house had been on fire. Being however of an astute and cunning disposition, as the housekeeper of such a nobleman ought to be, the woman gave Ariadne such vague and general, but at the same time reassuring answers, that while she tranquillized the maiden's mind on the one hand, she elicited on the other fresh questions which in themselves were explanations of what had occurred.

"You assure me, then, that my kind-hearted benefactor, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, is safe?" said Ariadne.

"Yes—quite safe."

"Is the house totally consumed? and am I indebted to a neighbour's hospitality for this asylum?"

"I am afraid the damage is great—and you are freely welcome here."

"Was it the Baronet who saved me?" inquired Ariadne, secretly wishing in her heart that the response would be in the affirmative.

"Yes—he rescued you. You were senseless, I suppose?"

"I had fainted through terror the moment I heard the alarm of fire."

"Ah! poor young lady, and enough too to frighten you! I presume you are some relation to Sir Douglas Huntingdon?"

"Not the least," returned Ariadne. "He is my benefactor—that is to say, he has behaved handsomely, kindly, and nobly towards me, although I have only known him for I may say a few hours—indeed since last night. But this reminds me that his excellent housekeeper, Mrs. Baines, has behaved like a mother to me: do you know whether she is quite safe?"

"I have already told you," answered Lord Leveson's housekeeper, "that no lives have been lost."

"Is Mrs. Baines here in this house?"

"No—but at a neighbour's."

"Ah! I understand," said Ariadne: "when so dreadful an occurrence as a fire takes place, in a house, the inmates speedily become dispersed throughout the neighbourhood."

"Yes—that is always the case."

"And now tell me beneath whose roof I have found an asylum?" asked Ariadne.

"Have you ever heard of a nobleman named Leveson—the Marquis of Leveson?" inquired the housekeeper, with becoming caution.

"No, never—Oh! yes—I answered too hastily," said Ariadne, suddenly correcting herself, as she remembered having read that the Mr. Dysart who was hung a short time back was the husband of the Marquis of Leveson's niece. "I have heard his lordship's name mentioned, now that I think of it—but quite in a casual manner!"

"Well, then, should you be pleased or otherwise,' asked the housekeeper, "if you heard that you were beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson?"

"I should esteem myself highly honoured," returned Ariadne, with that simplicity of prejudice in favour of the aristocracy which was natural with one who had never been taught either by lessons or by experience, to loath, hate, and abominate that aristocracy as the greatest curse that God in his wrath or Satan in his malignity ever inflicted upon a country.

"Well, then," said the housekeeper, "this is the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson: and I occupy an important post in his lordship's household. His lordship is an excellent man, and I am sure that you will like him amazingly when you come to know him. Besides which, he is certain to feel a great interest in you after your adventure of this night. And then, too, there is his beautiful niece Lady Ernestina Dysart—one of the handsomest and finest women in England. Ah! how unfortunate she has been," added the housekeeper, shaking her head with much apparent solemnity.

"Yes, I know to what you allude," said Ariadne, with a profound sigh, as the thought of Dysart's fate, by a natural association, conjured up ideas of Newgate, and forcibly reminded her of her brother Theodore's recent misfortunes. "It was when reading certain circumstances in the newspaper that I first became acquainted with the name of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Well, my dear young lady," said the housekeeper, "I need not tell you that it was a sad and shocking blow for his lordship and his lordship's niece. But I see that I must not chatter in this way to you any longer. Pray compose yourself to rest. I will leave a light in your room: and on this table by your bedside you will find cordials, restoratives, and various kinds of refreshment, should you feel exhausted or faint. I will visit you early in the morning, and hope to learn that you have slept off the effects of the alarm and nervousness produced by the fire."

The housekeeper then withdrew: and Ariadne speedily sank into a profound slumber, little suspecting into what a maze of perils she had been so perfidiously betrayed.

The first thing in the morning Brockman acquainted the Marquis with the arrival of a young lady in the middle of the night: and as the valet had been conversing with the housekeeper only a few minutes before he repaired to his master's chamber, he had gleaned from her lips all that she herself had gleaned from Ariadne's. The Marquis of Leveson was unfeignedly astonished when he heard of this arrival: and Brockman saw at once that his master had really *not* expected any such occurrence.

But while they were still deliberating upon the event, and the valet was explaining to the Marquis how the fair stranger had spoken of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the fire which had occurred at his house, a footman knocked at the door to announce that a man, who declined giving his name, solicited an immediate audience of his lordship. That this was one of the men who had brought the fair stranger to the mansion during the night, was presumable: and the Marquis, anxious to learn more of the matter, at once proceeded to the room where the individual was waiting.

The visitor was none other than the Hangman, dressed out in his very best apparel: but his ill-favoured countenance and sinister look were not much improved by the advantages of a Sunday garb. However, the Marquis did not expect to encounter an elegant gentleman in the individual who had brought the fair stranger to his house: but at the same time he little suspected that the ruffian who now stood in his presence was the Public Executioner—the man who had been admitted into the joint confidence of his niece Ernestina and the Prince Regent relative to the affair of the deceased Paul Dysart!

"Well, and what is your business?" inquired the nobleman.

"I called about the young girl that me and a couple of pals of mine left here last night," said the Hangman, with the most brazen effrontery.

"And pray," demanded the Marquis, assuming a stern look,—"what made you bring that young female hither?"

"You see, my lord," replied Daniel Coffin, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon's house was burnt to the ground during the past night. Me and my pals happened to be mingling quite promiscuous in the crowd that the fire collected; and, lo and behold! the Baronet brought down a young lady in his arms, half naked and in a fainting state. So, seeing that she was beautiful as an angel, we got possession of her—whipped her into a coach—and brought her here——"

"But why did you bring her hither?" demanded the Marquis: "that is the point I want you to clear up."

"Oh! there's no gammon about me, my lord," exclaimed Coffin. "The fact is, I've been in those secret chambers of your lordship's, and have looked at all the pretty things in the shape of statues and paintings——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the nobleman, the truth flashing to his comprehension: "then you are——"

"Dan'el Coffin, at your lordship's service," was the reply. "If your lordship wants references," added the fellow, with cool self-sufficiency, "I can give 'em either to Lady Ernestina or the Prince Regent."

"Well, I know now who you are and all about you," said the Marquis, scarcely able to conceal the sensation of utter loathing which he experienced as he gazed upon the public executioner. "In plain terms, then, you fancied that in consequence of having seen my private apartments, you would not be doing wrong in bringing the young girl to me?"

"That's just what it is, my lord," answered the Hangman.

"But do you know who she is?" inquired the Marquis: "what is her station in life?—is she the mistress of Sir Douglas Huntingdon—a relative—or a servant? In fact, tell me all about her."

"She's not a servant, but looks like a very genteel young person—almost a lady, I should say. But one thing is very certain—she's *not* the Baronet's mistress: for I happen to know that she hasn't even known him many hours."

"But a few minutes are enough to ruin a woman's virtue—let alone a few hours," said the Marquis. "However, that is of little consequence, since the girl is really beautiful. And now after all you have said, do you mean me to understand that you are not well acquainted with her? Of course you are! What is her name?"

"I can't tell your lordship—I know no more than Adam," was the reply. "The fact is, in a few words, me and my pals were at Shooter's Hill on a little business the night before last; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was travelling that way, fell into our hands. Within the same hour, another accident also threw this young lady in our way: and to be brief, they both succeeded in effecting their escape and getting off together. So it was natural that the Baronet should give the young girl an asylum: and that's the way she came to be at his house. But hasn't your lordship seen her yet?"

"Not yet. I am however told that she is really very beautiful," observed the Marquis.

"Beautiful!" cried the Hangman, with a diabolical leer: "she's so sweetly pretty that if I hadn't thought your lordship would give a good price for her, I should have kept her for myself. I don't know much of these matters; but I must say that you need only look in her face to see that she's innocence itself."

"Well, and so now you are come for your reward?" said the Marquis. "What do you expect?"

"Fifty guineas won't hurt your lordship," answered the Hangman.

"There—take that," said the Marquis, throwing down his purse, which he knew contained more than the sum demanded.

Daniel Coffin picked up the purse from the table where the nobleman had tossed it, and then took his departure, well pleased with the success of his visit.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

A CATASTROPHE.

THE chamber to which Ariadne Varian had been consigned at Leveson House, was the one that communicated with the dressing-room whence a secret-door opened into the private suite of apartments already so often referred to in our narrative. This bed-chamber was sometimes occupied by the Marquis himself; but he as frequently slept in a room on a higher storey, for the sake of the convenience offered by contiguous baths. Thus, on the particular occasion now referred to, the nobleman had spent the night in this last-mentioned chamber: and therefore was it that the housekeeper, with fiendish forethought, consigned Ariadne to the one whence the communication led to the private suite of apartments.

On awaking after some hours of refreshing sleep, Ariadne recalled to mind everything that had occurred during the past night: but still it was without the slightest misgiving or suspicion she remembered that she was now beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson.

While she was thus collecting her ideas, the housekeeper entered the room, bearing a tray, containing the young maiden's breakfast.

"Is it very late?" inquired Ariadne, fancying that she must have slept a long time.

"It is a little past ten o'clock," replied the housekeeper: "but you will do well to take your breakfast in bed as you have passed through so much excitement and alarm during the past night. Moreover, you have no apparel of any kind here—and I must see about getting some clothes presently. His lordship will come and pay you a visit immediately, and will then confer with you on your plans and prospects."

"What, here!" ejaculated Ariadne, surprised at the remark and conceiving that she had not properly understood it.

"And why not?" asked the housekeeper, with a smile. "The Marquis is old enough to be your father: indeed you are a mere child to him. Moreover, I am going to remain here with you, my love!"

Still Ariadne experienced a secret displeasure at the idea of a stranger visiting her bed-room. Her pure-mindedness and natural delicacy shrank from the thought: but she scarcely dared to venture any farther remonstrance, as she felt that she was under greet obligations to those who had given her an asylum beneath that roof. Besides which, as she had no garments to put on—not a stitch nor rag in the whole world beyond the night-drapery that she wore—she could not rise and dress herself to receive the Marquis; and it was natural that he should wish to know whom he had beneath his roof. But this reflection suddenly gave rise to another: namely, what account could she render of herself?—what name should she pass by? To refuse all replies to the questions that might be put, would seem not only suspicious but rude to a degree: and yet, on the other hand, how could she tell the truth?—how announce the name of Ariadne Varian? Ah! the poor girl was indeed unused to the arts of deceit and unskilled in the ways of duplicity!

She was sitting up in bed, pondering mournfully upon these points, and partaking of some chocolate which the housekeeper had poured out for her, when a gentle knock was heard at the door. The housekeeper at once opened it; and the Marquis entered the room. Ariadne instinctively shrank beneath the bed-clothes, while her cheeks were suffused with blushes.

"How is the fair guest with whose presence circumstances have thus honoured me?" said the Marquis, assuming his softest voice and blandest manner. "Really the incidents which have thus brought you, young lady, within these walls are so romantic, that they invest you with additional charms."

Ariadne said nothing: she was overwhelmed with confusion. But averting her blushing countenance, she felt such strange sensations come over her—sensations of mingled alarm, outraged modesty, and bitter annoyance—that she was ready to burst into tears.

"You are welcome to my house, young lady," resumed the Marquis,—"most welcome! Indeed the longer you grace it with your presence, the happier I shall feel. My excellent housekeeper here will see that your slightest wants shall not merely be attended to, but even anticipated——"

"I thank your lordship," murmured Ariadne, now recovering the power of utterance: "but I shall not intrude on your lordship's hospitality much longer. Indeed if your lordship's housekeeper will only be kind enough to furnish me with apparel, I shall at once prepare to take my departure," she added, her sense of violated decency now triumphing over her fears and imparting firmness to her tone.

"Well, well, my dear young lady—you are your own mistress, no doubt," said the Marquis, believing Ariadne's conduct to be nothing more nor less than mere affectation: for he could not fancy that it was possible for her to have passed even a few short hours in the dwelling of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and have come forth pure and chaste. "But methinks that this precipitation on your part to leave my mansion, where there is every disposition to treat you kindly——"

"My lord," interrupted Ariadne, now turning her eyes towards the Marquis while her countenance was flushed with indignation: "I know not what may be the manners and customs of fashionable life; but in the sphere to which I belong, your presence in my chamber would not only be deemed a violation of all the rules of hospitality, but a positive outrage and insult."

"Upon my honour, you take my conduct most unkindly!" exclaimed the Marquis. "But I will withdraw for the present, since you appear to wish it."

He then quitted the room, making a rapid sign to the housekeeper: and the moment the door closed behind him, Ariadne burst into a flood of tears.

"My dear girl, don't take on like this," said the housekeeper. "Why, I am really surprised at you! His lordship did not mean any offence—how could he? He perhaps spoke in rather an off-hand manner: but then that was his familiarity of tone towards one in whom he felt interested. I can assure you

that the Marquis is generosity and liberality personified. If you asked him for any boon on which you set your mind, you would have it. And young ladies *have* their little whims and caprices, you know——"

"Good heavens! what means this strange language?" cried Ariadne, all the suspicions and misgivings which within the last few minutes had been aroused in her mind, now becoming excited to a painful degree. "If you really wish to befriend me——"

"What can I do, young lady? Speak!"

"Procure me some apparel. I cannot offer to recompense you at this moment: but in the course of the day—when once I shall have seen Sir Douglas Huntingdon——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the housekeeper, now perfectly convinced in her own mind that Ariadne was the Baronet's mistress. "But wherefore should you be in such haste to quit this mansion? Do you desire to return to that Sir Douglas Huntingdon of whom you have spoken?"

"I do—he is my only friend!" exclaimed Ariadne, with passionate vehemence, and not reflecting for a moment what interpretation might be put upon the manner in which she spoke of the Baronet. "But will you—will you, my good woman, procure me some fitting apparel? Surely Lady Ernestina Dysart would take compassion upon me—or one of the female servants might lend me a gown—a shawl—a bonnet—in fine, the barest necessaries ——"

"To be sure, my dear girl," said the housekeeper: "I will procure all you want in good time."

"At once!" cried Ariadne, springing from the couch. "Procure me some raiment—I will dress myself with all possible haste——and will then intrude no longer ——"

"Ah! you are wrong to speak of intrusion," interrupted the housekeeper. "But come into this dressing-room: here are all the requisites of the toilette—and I will soon procure you fitting apparel."

"Oh! then I shall thank you indeed!" exclaimed Ariadne, somewhat tranquillised by this assurance.

But while she was combing out her beautiful long flaxen hair in the dressing-room adjoining the bed-chamber, the housekeeper took advantage of a moment when the maiden's back was turned, to touch the secret spring and open the door leading into the suite of private apartments.

"I asked you just now whether you really wished to return to Sir Douglas Huntingdon," resumed the wily woman: "and you declared that such was your desire."

"He is my benefactor—I have already told you as much," said Ariadne. "I am under obligations to him—deep obligations," she repeated with a profound sigh, as she thought of her brother to whom the Baronet had despatched his valet James with reassuring messages and with money.

"You are wrong, young lady—you are wrong," continued the housekeeper, "to think of returning to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, when you may be so much happier at the house of the Marquis of Leveson. Behold, my dear girl—behold this splendidly furnished apartment into which the dressing-room opens," she exclaimed, drawing back the secret door. "All these rooms that you see shall be your's—with domestics to wait upon you—if you will only consent to remain here! Ah! my dear young lady, I am sure I shall not supplicate in vain!"

The amazement produced by these words overwhelmed as it were the alarm previously excited: and Ariadne, desisting for a moment from the operation of combing out her hair, turned upon the woman a look so full of wonder and startled inquiry, that it even expressed her feelings more eloquently than the words to which she simultaneously gave utterance.

"Wherefore should you invite me thus to remain within these walls?—wherefore should you offer me the inducement of these elegant rooms? Indeed, what know you of me, that such a proposal should have emanated from your lips?"

"Ah! young lady," said the housekeeper, adopting a tone of gentle persuasion, "did you not observe that the Marquis surveyed you with admiration! And surely, surely you will not be so cruel as to treat him with indifference or scorn?"

"Good heavens! what words are these that I hear!" exclaimed Ariadne, the colour coming and going in rapid transitions upon her cheeks. "It is impossible that this can be the house of the Marquis of Leveson!—impossible that any nobleman would have intruded into the chamber which his hospitality had afforded to a young and friendless girl!—impossible that any female in his service would dare to address me in the language which has just fallen from your lips!"

"Now, if it comes to the matter of that," exclaimed the housekeeper, suddenly throwing off the mask and speaking in a tone of coarse insolence, "I don't see why you should pretend to be so very particular. Come, come, young woman—here's enough of this nonsense: and I have already adopted the coaxing tone too long. I suppose you meant to sell yourself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, even if you have not done it already. But let me tell you that the Marquis of Leveson will prove more profitable to you. I saw just now by his lordship's words that he does not regard you as the stubbornest of prudes, or yet as a dragon of virtue; and I know his humour well enough to feel assured that he won't waste much time in coming to the point with you. Indeed he has only retired for a few minutes, just to give me the opportunity of being explicit with you."

A mortal paleness gradually spread itself over Ariadne's countenance, as these words smote upon her ears, carrying as it were the blight of a pestilence down into her very soul: and staggering towards a seat, she sank upon it crushed and overwhelmed by a terrible consternation. A faintness seized upon her—a film spread rapidly over her eyes—and she felt that her senses were abandoning her,—when the sudden sound of a door opening and shutting recalled her to herself. Startled back as it were into complete consciousness, she threw her affrighted looks around, and perceived that she was now alone. The housekeeper had left her—and it was the sound of the outer door of the bedchamber that she had heard opening and closing so abruptly. But that door almost immediately opened again: and now it was the Marquis of Leveson who re-appeared.

A scream of terror burst from the lips of Ariadne: and not only did alarm, but also a feel-

ing of outraged modesty prompt her to fly from his presence: for be it understood that she was in a state of semi-nudity, having on nothing but the night-gear which left her neck and bosom all exposed. As she turned thus abruptly away from the approaching Marquis, she beheld the door which the housekeeper had left open when she displayed the handsomely-furnished apartment to which it led.

"Beautiful girl!" exclaimed the Marquis, catching sight of her naked charms and instantaneously inflamed by the view. "Resistance is vain!—besides, wherefore prove so coy—so cruel——"

But Ariadne had rushed forward into the apartment to which the secret door opened: and as she shut it promptly behind her, she turned round in eager search for the lock, that she might secure herself against the Marquis. But what was her surprise when she beheld nothing but the uniform and unbroken surface of the handsomely papered wall, —no lock—no handle—not even so much as a keyhole, to indicate the presence of a door! The thought flashed to her mind that she had fallen into some new snare: and overcome with a sense of terror now wrought up to an excruciating pitch, she sank down into one of the splendid arm-chairs with which the apartment was furnished. But at the same instant did another rending scream burst from her lips, as the sharp click of the perfidious mechanism fell upon her ears, and as her arms and shoulders were clasped by the springs that started forth from the chairs!

At the same time the invisible door by which she had entered that room, was opened—and the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance. Instantaneously shutting the door behind him, he stood feasting his eyes upon the charms of his intended victim. But, Oh! his hard heart melted not with pity as that sweet countenance was upturned with an expression so earnestly imploring,

so pathetically entreating towards his own: no pity nor remorse had he for that damsel's sake;—all his ideas, all his aspirations were concentrated in the burning heat of one absorbing passion!

"My lord, my lord," murmured Ariadne, "have mercy upon me!"

But as the maiden uttered these words in a dying tone, her heard drooped forward—the gaspings of her breath ceased—and the palpitations of her snowy bosom were no longer perceptible.

"She has fainted," said the Marquis to himself. "But she is not the first who——"

The nobleman's reflection was suddenly cut short by a mortal alarm which seized upon him: for as he stooped down and looked at Ariadne, it suddenly struck him that she was dead!

He hastily placed his hand upon her heart: but it beat not;—and the bosom which his hand thus pressed in its nudity, was as still as if death were indeed there. With a cold shudder running through his entire form, he touched the secret spring which released her from the grasp of the mechanism: and lifting her in his arms he bore her back into the bed-chamber and laid her upon the couch. Still did she continue senseless: and if that were not the sleep of death, then assuredly was it a swoon of a most alarming character.

Vainly did the Marquis sprinkle her countenance with water and apply a scent-bottle to her nostrils. She moved not—her heart was still—her pulse imperceptible;—and all vital colouring was disappearing from her lips. Her nails—those beautifully shaped nails, so pellucid with their roseate tint a few moments before—now were becoming of a bluish appearance: and this circumstance gave a still deeper shock to the soul of the Marquis, for he regarded it as the unmistakable sign of death!

He rang the bell—and the housekeeper answered the summons. Nothing could equal the woman's dismay on beholding Ariadne thus stretched lifeless on the couch; and the Marquis saw by the sudden horror which seized upon her what she also thought—his worst fears being then confirmed, that the maiden was indeed dead!

Almost wild with alarm, he bade the housekeeper hasten and fetch Lady Ernestina thither; and in a minute or two the woman returned accompanied by his lordship's niece. But Ernestina at once declared that all human aid was unavailing, and that the damsel was no more!

Nothing could exceed the excruciation of alarm which now reigned in that chamber. What was to be done?—how dispose of the corpse?—how account for the presence of the young female in the house at all? The Marquis paced to and fro in the chamber like a madman: the housekeeper fell upon her knees by the side of the bed, and began giving way to the bitterest lamentations;—while Lady Ernestina, conquering her emotions somewhat in the presence of the awful dilemma, stood gazing upon the beautiful face of the dead, revolving in her mind a thousand different schemes for the disposal of the corpse.

"Good heavens! what a calamity—what an awful calamity!" exclaimed the Marquis, wringing his hands at one moment, and then gesticulating with them frantically the next.

"Oh! it is enough to hang us all," groaned the housekeeper. "What on earth will become of us?"

"Calm yourselves, calm yourselves—I beseech you!" said Ernestina. "It is only by extreme prudence, circumspection, and caution that we shall avoid discovery—that is to say, if the occurrence *must* be concealed. But why not let it be avowed? The girl was not murdered—at least not murdered in the positive meaning of the term——"

"But there must be a coroner's inquest, and all the annoyances and dangers of an inquiry!" said the Marquis. "How am I to account for the girl being here?—under what circumstances am I to say she died? If recognised and identified as the one who was rescued last night from the fire at Huntingdon's house, how came she here? Wherefore was she brought to such a distance, instead of being taken to some dwelling close at hand? Ah! the case is fraught wth terrible suspicion, Ernestina—you must see that it is!"

"Oh! yes," said the housekeeper, with bitter lamentations: "it must be hushed up—it must be hushed up!"

"Then do you know what is to be done," said Ernestina, a sudden idea striking her. "You must send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon—tell him all that has happened—and throw yourself upon his mercy. There is nothing else to be done."

"But if this girl was his mistress," exclaimed the Marquis, "he might seek a cruel revenge. And yet it is hardly possible that he can care anything for her, seeing that their acquaintance has only been of a few hours——Yes, yes," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself: "your advice must be adopted, Ernestina. Huntingdon would not ruin an old friend!"

"Besides," observed the nobleman's niece, "you will ascertain who the young girl was, and whether there will be much inquiry made by relatives or by friends into the circumstances of her death."

"Be it then as you say," observed the Marquis. "And now, Ernestina, for God's sake take this distracted woman away with you, and endeavour to console her—or at all events to make her hold her peace—while I send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

Lady Ernestina accordingly persuaded the housekeeper to accompany her away from the chamber of death; and the Marquis, quitting the room also, and locking the door behind him, hastened to make a confidant of his valet Brockman, whom he despatched forthwith in search of the Baronet. In about half-an-hour Brockman returned accompanied by Sir Douglas, whom he had found at an hotel in the immediate neighbourhood of his own ruined mansion: and as the valet had not given the Baronet the least intimation of wherefore his presence was required in Albemarle-street, he was naturally much surprised at being thus peremptorily summoned thither. At first, indeed, he had refused to yield to Brockman's request, fancying that some treacherous or spiteful trick might be meditated againt him in revenge for the part he had played in rescuing Louisa Stanley from the power of the Marquis of Leveson. But perceiving, by Brockman's manner, that the affair was urgent, although the valet declined entering into explanatory particulars, Sir

Douglas ultimately agreed to accompany him to Leveson House.

On arriving there, the Baronet was at once conducted into an apartment where he found the Marquis alone, but pacing to and fro in a state of dreadful excitement and agitation.

"Good heavens, Leveson," he exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

"Tell me, Huntingdon—tell me, before I speak a word to the point," said the Marquis of Leveson, advancing hurriedly, and seizing the Baronet by the hand,—"tell me whether there is any ill feeling on your part towards me?"

"Not a whit!" cried Sir Douglas: "on the contrary, I was fearful that you would break off your friendship with me on account of my intrusion upon your proceedings at so critical a moment the day before yesterday. But, my dear Leveson, as you called at Stratton Street and saw Miss Bathurst on that morning, you are of course acquainted with the entire mystery relative——"

"Ah! my dear Huntingdon, all the Miss Bathursts, and Clara Stanleys, and Venetias in the world are at this moment nothing to me," interrupted the Marquis: "for you see before you one of the most miserable of men——"

"Indeed! I do observe that you are pale and agitated—very pale," cried the Baronet. "But what is the matter? Is there anything I can do for you? Though having troubles enough of my own at this moment—what with the burning down of my house—the loss of a young lady in whom I had suddenly conceived the deepest interest——"

"Oh! now, *now* I am more wretched than ever!" exclaimed the Marquis. "Huntingdon—my honour, almost my life, is in your hands——"

"Good heavens! what mean you?" cried the Baronet, nearly as much stunned as he was bewildered.

"Will you swear to screen me—swear to hold me harmless—swear not to betray me——"

"Yes, yes—I will swear anything, if you only relieve me from this torturing suspense."

"Know, then, that the young lady whom you have lost——"

"Good God! has she fallen into your hands?"

"Yes—but I knew not——"

"Where is she?—where is she?" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, seizing the Marquis by the collar of his coat. "Oh! if you have dared to harm a hair of her head——"

"Heavens! how shall I tell you the dreadful truth!" almost yelled forth the wretched Marquis as he writhed in the grasp of the Baronet.

"Villain, you have ravished her!" thundered Sir Douglas, hurling the Marquis from him with terrific violence: then dashing his open palms forcibly against his brow in all the wild fury of excitement, he exclaimed, "Would to God! that you had reported her death to me, rather than this!"

"Her death—her death!" repeated the Marquis, leaning upon the chair against which the Baronet had flung him: "yes—it *is* her death that I have to report——for she is a spotless virgin so far as I am concerned!"

The Baronet staggered back a few paces, and then reeled as if seized with a sudden vertigo; for despite the confusion into which his ideas were suddenly thrown, still was there a strong lurid beam penetrating them with a horrible clearness, bringing forth in dread relief the fact that the young girl was no more!

"Dead!" he at length muttered between his teeth: "dead, do you say?" he repeated in a low thick voice, as with a pale countenance and with wildness in his eyes he gazed upon the Marquis.

"Yes—she is dead," answered Leveson: "and if all my fortune could bring her back to life, it should be surrendered up."

"Tell me how this happened," said the Baronet, pressing his hands to his brow as if to steady his reeling brain: then sitting down, he appeared to await the explanations with the vacancy of look and the abstracted manner of one whose senses are in a whirl.

"I will tell you all—everything," said the Marquis, in a hurried tone of breathless agitation: "and then must I throw myself upon your mercy. In the middle of the night some men brought that girl hither—I knew not who she was—I never saw her before—I had not bargained with them for the service which they thus thrust upon me. The men told some tale about you and the young girl having been together at a hut on Shooters' Hill."

"Ah! then I understand who the villains were," exclaimed the Baronet, indignation once more bringing back the colour to his cheeks. "But go on—go on."

"They brought the girl here, then, after the fire at your house," resumed the Marquis; "and she was received into the mansion. Believing her, in plain truth, to have been your mistress, I fancied that her coyness was assumed: and perhaps I was too hasty—too importunate. At all events she sought refuge in that very room which contains the chairs—you know what chairs I mean—and sinking into one, the fright I presume was too much for her—and—and she died!"

"Poor Ariadne!" murmured the Baronet to himself: and averting his head, he dashed away a tear.

"On my life," continued the Marquis, "I have told you the truth, Huntingdon. I have explained the events precisely as they took place; and I need scarcely say that every possible remedy and restorative was applied——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas, suddenly. "Let me see her."

This command, uttered with a stern and abrupt imperiousness, was at once obeyed by the Marquis of Leveson; and he conducted the Baronet to the room where Ariadne lay. On the threshold of the chamber, Sir Douglas turned suddenly round and motioned the Marquis not to follow him: then closing the door abruptly, he remained alone in the chamber with the dead.

Advancing slowly, hesitatingly, and with a sensation of awe, to the side of the couch, Sir Douglas Huntingdon beheld all that remained of Ariadne Varian, stretched like a beautiful statue before his eyes. Her light hair, swept entirely away from her brows, fell back over the pillow upon which her head rested,—thus revealing the whole of that sweet countenance, with the delicately chiselled and faultless features on which a smile of angelic resignation appeared to rest, as if in the very moment of dissolution she had experienced the certainty that she was about to pass from the woes of

earth to the joys of heaven. Her eyelids were shut close, with the brown lashes resting upon the alabaster cheeks; so that she appeared as if she were only sleeping. The lips had remained slightly apart, affording a glimpse of the pearls within, and thus strengthening the impression that she was not dead, but only slept. The slight drapery which she wore, had settled in such a way as to develop the gentle undulations and softly swelling contours of her sylphid form: the arms remained gracefully rounded, like those of one in a slumber, and not with the rigidity of the last sleep from which there is no awakening upon earth;—and the symmetrical beauty of the lower limbs was likewise revealed by the plaits of her virgin vesture. Alas! that this should be the raiment of the dead!

Sir Douglas Huntingdon gazed upon her with a sort of incredulity that she was really no more; and for nearly a minute he thought she was only sleeping. He hoped so—and he earnestly prayed within himself that such might be the case. Yet the longer he looked down upon that alabaster countenance, the fainter grew that hope; while the stronger became the conviction that she was indeed no more!

"Yes—her spirit has fled for ever," he inwardly mused: "the young, the innocent, the beautiful has gone to that heaven which is her fitting home. She looks as if she did but sleep: and yet there is the absence of all vital colouring from those cheeks—and the breath comes not from between those lips. Her form is motionless, though not yet stricken with the rigidity of death. O Ariadne! I knew thee but for a few hours: and yet in that short time——But this is childish on my part," ejaculated the Baronet aloud, as he made a sudden effort to master his emotions: then feeling that his eyes were dim and that tears were trickling down his cheeks, he no longer sought to check the natural current of his grief;—and sitting down on the edge of the couch, he took the hand—the small cold hand—of Ariadne in his own; and averting his eyes from her marble countenance, he said aloud, and with a passionate outburst of feeling, "I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance, which was so lovely in its animation!"

Then for upwards of a minute he remained in that position, wrapped up in the deepest thought; until at length regaining somewhat of his lost firmness, he rose abruptly—threw one last lingering look upon the deceased—and then quitted the room.

On the landing outside he found the Marquis waiting for him; and in silence did they proceed back to the apartment where they had previously conversed.

"That young girl, Lord Leveson," said the Baronet, in a deep and solemn tone, "has a brother who will sooner or later come to demand an account of his sister. Of me will he demand that account, inasmuch as I had written to him to state that she had found an asylum—an honourable asylum—with me; and when he comes therefore to inquire for her, what answer am I to give?"

"You will not compromise me?" said the Marquis, in a tone of earnest entreaty. "Can it not be averred that, rendered houseless by the fire, the damsel was consigned to the care of my housekeeper or niece, whichever you like to name—but that she died of the fright produced by that conflagration?"

"Yes—this tale must indeed be told," said the Baronet. "And now let instructions be given for the funeral of the poor girl."

"And what name is to be placed upon her coffin?" asked Lord Leveson, inwardly rejoiced to find that no exposure was to take place.

"What name?" repeated the Baronet. "There is no reason *now* why her real name should be concealed—therefore upon her coffin-lid have inscribed the words, *Ariadne Varian.*"

"What!" ejaculated the Marquis, immediately struck by the name: "surely this poor girl——"

"Yes—I know what is passing in your mind," said Huntingdon, in a mournful tone: "she was the sister of him the narrative of whose escape you have read in the newspapers."

"But her brother," exclaimed the Marquis—"is he not a fugitive? and will he ever come to claim his sister?"

"If I can obtain for him a free pardon, for which I am about to interest myself," returned the Baronet. "But of all this no matter;—suffice it for you, Lord Leveson, to know that I am interested in the young man's behalf. Would to God that it were within the range of mortal power to recall his sister to life!"

With these words Sir Douglas Huntingdon hurried away in a state of mind such as he had never experienced befor

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CHAPTER LXXXVII.

SYNCOPE AND TETANOS.

DIMLY and feebly did a sense of returning consciousness steal into Ariadne's mind,—slowly, slowly as the glimmering of dawn struggles against the mists of night in the eastern horizon. Whether she had fainted or slept she knew not: nor indeed had she the power to reflect upon the point—for her thoughts were all in confusion—not painfully agitating in the brain, but in dull, numb, inert chaos. That there had been a period of oblivion she had something like a distinct notion: but whether it had lasted for days, hours, or only minutes, she knew not—nor had she sufficient clearness of mind to conjecture.

But as the sense of consciousness came back—as this re-awakening of the intellect began to take place—she became aware that there was somebody in the room. She endeavoured to open her eyes—but could not. Nevertheless, she felt that the light of day was upon those closed lids, and that it was not a stupendous darkness that weighed them down. Amidst the dull and stagnant chaos of her thoughts, flickered in upon her intellect a somewhat brighter beam than the primal one of returning consciousness; and this new ray of intelligence seemed to enlighten her the least thing more distinctly as to her exact condition. She became aware, indeed, that she was stretched upon a couch; but after that vain attempt to open her eyes, she remained for perhaps two or three whole minutes without any farther endeavour to move. Then hearing a voice suddenly speaking near her, the tones flowing murmuringly upon her ears without her being able to understand the words uttered, she instinctively at-

tempted to turn round towards the speaker. But no!—she was bound hand and foot by some invisible and unknown spell—enchained by some stupendous and indomitable influence—turned into a statue so far as her physical being was concerned, and animated with only just a sufficiency of the spiritual essence to give her a dim and twilight idea of her own condition.

Still was her appreciation of this condition too indistinct, too vague, and too obscure to produce any poignant feeling. Sensation she had, it was true—but so lulled, so steeped in a mystic lethargy, so dull, numb, and sluggish, that it had not sufficient vitality for any keenness of reflection, whether painful or otherwise.

Gradually the idea began to become strengthened in Ariadne's mind relative to the presence of some one near her; and at length it seemed as if an inspiration dawned in unto her soul, whispering the name of Douglas Huntingdon. Then she appeared to acquire a knowledge that there was such a person as he in the world; but how or when she had known him before, she had no distinct comprehension. She heard him breathing syllables of sorrow near her; and then she felt him take her hand in his own. A pulse seemed to thrill through her entire frame at that contact,—yes, thrill even pleasurably, as if it were the touch of life giving back animation into one on whom death sat heavy and cold: but yet that thrill was only faint and feeble—and it imparted not complete vitality nor broke the spell that entranced the maiden.

She felt her hand clasped in that of Huntingdon; and she felt, too, by the touch that *his* hand burnt with the fever-heat of excitement, and that *her own* was as cold as ice. She longed—Oh! how she longed to return the pressure which she felt: for now a strange, vague, and ill-defined perception of the real truth of her condition stole into her mind, and made her feel a desire to make known the fact that she was indeed *alive!* But not in the slightest—not in the faintest—not in the remotest degree could she return that pressure: not a muscle could she move—not a nerve quivered in response to her will. The faintest breeze has more power to shake the stateliest tree, than her volition could exercise over her own faculties of motion. Still as death—motionless as a statue, she lay—with a gentle glimmering of the spark of life that was just conscious of its own existence, but could not make this existence known to another. And now therefore arose in her mind the conviction that she breathed not though she lived—and on the other hand, that she was not dead though animation was all but utterly suspended.

A still brighter clearness shed its influence upon her mind—that mind which thus, after having first awakened as it were in the midst of a vast hall where a single lamp burnt dimly in the midst of the blackness, now felt as if additional lamps were being lighted up one by one so as to set forth by these slow degrees some fresh features of the place. She heard those words to which the Baronet gave utterance with so much feeling—"*I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance which was so lovely in its animation!*" Yes—she heard, she understood these words: she even perceived the impassioned vibration of tone which characterised them—the amount of anguish which they expressed! And again did she experience a thrill of the pulse through her entire frame—but a thrill that was felt not by him who held her hand and who believed it was the hand of the dead. Then this hand of hers was quitted by that of the Baronet: the contact had ceased—the fevered flesh and the marble-cold flesh touched each other no more—and instead of the thrill of the vibrating pulse, it was an ice chill that struck to the very core of the maiden's heart!

But now she felt—intuitively, instinctively felt—that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was gazing upon her. Her eyelids were closed, as we have already said; but it was in looking upward as it were from the mind itself—by the exertion, so to speak, of an inner sense of vision—that she thus felt that he *was* looking upon her. She could even understand the look—she could comprehend its nature—lingering, longing, sad, and mournful. But, O God! why did she not return it?—just heaven! why could she *not?*

She heard the door close: and now she knew that she was alone. The silence suddenly struck her as being awful, awful in the extreme: and then too, at the same instant, a more horrible clearness sprang up in her mind—a fearful light flaming up in her soul! In a word, she understood all in a moment,—that she was in a species of trance—a syncope—and that she was believed to be dead!

Dead!—great heaven, what awful thoughts now sprang up in her imagination! Was the hand of death in reality upon her?—was she dying?—would she soon be really *dead?* Death! its bitterness was not past—its sting was there—and the grave perhaps would soon assert its victory. But to die—Oh! to die while she felt that she was so young—for her thoughts were now every instant becoming more vividly clear and more keenly perceptive,—to die so young, it was terrible, terrible! Then her brother, too—for she now remembered him and thought of him—yes, his image suddenly sprang up clearly and tangibly as it were before her,—this well beloved brother, what would *he* think, what would he say when he heard that she had died thus prematurely, thus suddenly? But no—she could not die—she must not die yet! Innocent, stainless of crime—aye, even immaculate though she were in mind as well as in body—she was not prepared to die! She would move her limbs—she would turn round on that couch—she would raise herself up—and she would exhibit all the powers of full, living, breathing, moving vitality! Alas! vain, vain were the thoughts—vain the aspirations—vain the endeavours: so far from stirring hand or foot, she could not even move a muscle of her countenance—nor unclose an eyelid—nor feel her lips quiver with the breath of life!

We said that her mind had now a horrible clearness: and such indeed it was. For her thoughts began to flow in still more frightful and hideous channels—depicting all the paraphernalia of death—the laying out of the corpse (in *her* case perhaps a *seeming* corpse)—the putting on of the raiment of the dead—the enclosing in the shell—the screwing down of the lid of the coffin—the consignment to the grave—and the shovelling in of the damp and wormy clay! Heavens! as all these harrowing thoughts swept through the brain of the poor young girl, she endured an agony of agonies ineffable for human language—an agony all the more agonising because endured by one whose form was motionless and could not bend or yield as it were

with recoil, trembling, or shudder, to the dreadful influence of those thoughts. And now, with the extremest poignancy was the fact presented to her mind that she was not even *nearly* dead, but that her state was one presenting that phenomenon so strange, so awful, and so terrible in the history of human nature!

The horror produced by all these thoughts gradually merged into the more stupifying state of consternation; and then a dreamy repose stole over the young maiden. Oblivion supervened; and thus for a while were her senses steeped in forgetfulness. How long this interval lasted, she however knew not; and when she returned to consciousness she became aware that her posture on the couch was somewhat changed. She was now lying completely on her back; and she felt that her arms were placed close by her sides, and that her feet were likewise in close and parallel contact. Next she perceived, by the sensation, that something was fastened under her chin; and as she began to ponder upon the meaning of all this, the recollection of what had passed just previously to the last interval of oblivion slowly came back to her mind, until at length the awful—the crushing—the appalling thought settled in her soul, that she was laid out as a corpse!

Horror of horrors! With full, poignant, and vivid keenness, did all her consciousness return: and she once more became possessed of every faculty of perception. There was no doubt as to her actual position: she knew it—she understood it—she felt it all. She was believed to be dead—she was laid out in the usual manner ere being consigned to the coffin—and the winding-sheet already wrapped her form! The thought of all this was maddening, maddening. Her brain appeared to be on fire—and the sensation of gnawing flames had she also at the heart, though that heart beat not. Her eyelids were closed—nor could she open them: nevertheless lightnings appeared to flash before her vision. It was horrible, horrible, to experience all this, and yet not be able so much as to relieve the harrowed feelings with a shudder or a shriek. For when something dreadful meets the eye or strikes upon the mind, it *is* a relief to shudder in recoil or to send forth an ejaculation from the lips. But here was the unhappy girl bound as it were in the adamantine chains of utter petrifaction—a marble body with a soul of fire—incapable of performing the least function of life, and yet inspired with all life's keenest and acutest sensations!

All the faculties belonging to the mind seemed to have concentrated in themselves the vitality which naturally belonged to the body; and all the senses were sharpened to even a painful degree. Thus she could hear sounds the faintest and slightest imaginable—such as insects picking in the wood of the bedstead with the noise of the deathwatch! She could smell the clean linen which wrapped her as a winding-sheet, and which, perhaps from the nature of the soap used in washing it, had a certain earthy odour that made it indeed appear the raiment of the dead. She could feel all the plaits and folds of these cerements as they lay loose upon one portion of her form and tighter on another: she could feel the linen passing round her head, and the cambric that was tied as a bandage to hold up her chin. Through her closed lids could her eyes perceive the light of the sun streaming through the curtains of the window facing the couch—those beams which borrowed a deeper redness from the hue of those curtains! Thus were her senses acuminated to the keenest edge; and as the body was left motionless, those faculties appeared to exercise themselves with all the concentration of vitality which they had absorbed as it were from the physical powers.

In the midst of her harrowing thoughts she heard the door open, and the housekeeper's voice say in a low and mournful tone, "Walk in—walk in, Mr. Stimson—walk in."

Then the door was closed again very gently; and two persons advanced up to the side of the bed—the housekeeper and the man whom she had called Mr. Stimson.

"What a sweet corpse the dear girl does make," said the housekeeper, assuming a whimpering tone and heaving three or four deep-drawn sighs. "Ah! Mr. Stimson, she wasn't here many hours, but I really had taken quite a fancy to her—she was so amiable and good: and I do believe that in the same short time she grew quite as fond of me."

"Poor young lady!" returned Mr. Stimson, in a hollow and lugubrious voice. "How come it all about, ma'am?"

"Why, you see, Mr. Stimson," resumed the housekeeper, "this young lady was staying at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, and his house was burnt down last night. Such rapid progress did the fire make, that the dear girl well nigh fell a sacrifice to the flames; but a couple of noble-hearted gentlemen—one an officer in the Guards, and the other the son of a Bishop—rescued her at the peril of their lives; and the officer wrapped her up in his great military cloak. Then she was put into a hackney-coach that was passing at the time; and as Sir Douglas is very intimate here, he thought the best thing he could do was to send her to be taken care of by Lady Ernestina. The fright which the young lady received from the fire was no doubt dreadful; but we thought she had quite recovered, and didn't dream that she was in any possible danger. But about ten o'clock this morning the poor dear creature seemed to be taken so bad suddenly, that we got quite alarmed; and before we could even send for the doctor she was dead. Lord bless you, Mr. Stimson, she went off just like a child going to sleep in its mother's arms;—and with her dear head, poor young creature, pillowed on my bosom, she breathed her last."

"Well, ma'am," said Mr. Stimson, "it's a very great saytisfaction for you to know that you did your best, while death was doing his wust,—and that she went off like that there, with her head on your buzzim. She's as lovely a corpse as ever I had the measuring of."

"Yes," whimpered the housekeeper; "hasn't she got a sweet pretty face—and her flesh is just like wax. Poor thing! the worms will soon make havoc upon it."

"Poor thing!" echoed Mr. Stimson, in his deep sepulchral voice, which he purposely made as hollow and lugubrious as possible. "The wums indeed will prey upon the poor gal."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader

that Ariadne's feelings were now drawn to such an extreme tension, that it appeared as if her brain must burst and her heart-strings snap. She had no difficulty in discovering, from the preceding discourse, who Mr. Stimson was. He was evidently the undertaker. But the vile hypocrisy of that woman, the housekeeper—the false version she gave of the circumstances of Ariadne's arrival at the mansion—the assumed sympathy and commiseration with which she sought to play her part in the presence of the undertaker,—all this added to the poignancy and painfulness of the scene. But then the discourse itself—to hear herself styled *a corpse*—then the remark that her flesh was colourless as wax;—and lastly the observation—the frightful observation, relative to the worms soon preying upon her—Oh! all this was the most exquisite refinement of ineffable agonies!

But this crucifixion of the feelings was not yet passed through. She felt the undertaker place his rule upon her to measure her length for the coffin; and she heard him mutter to himself, in a low under tone, the exact measurement of feet and inches as he thus took it. Good God! how within herself she battled—Oh! how she battled for the power of sending forth one long loud thrilling shriek!—how she strove—heaven alone can tell how she strove—to force a vent for the transcending agony of her feelings! But no: all her efforts were vain and useless. The spell—the awful spell was upon her: and still like a marble woman was she animated with a soul of fire.

"And so you say, ma'am," observed Mr. Stimson, speaking in a low voice that was well suitable for the chamber of death, but yet with something more of a business tone than hitherto,—"and so, ma'am, it is to be a wery decent funeral—not over expensive, but respectable?"

"Just so," responded the housekeeper. "His lordship has entrusted the whole management to me; and I think, Mr. Stimson," she added in a significant tone, "that you and I can make everything comfortable between us?"

"Oh! to be sure," responded the undertaker. "Come, ma'am, tell me candidly how high you dare go: and then I can tell you how much profit you and me can sheer betwixt us."

"Well, I don't think his lordship would mind sixty or seventy guineas."

"Wery good," observed Mr. Stimson, with a low hollow chuckle which appeared to issue from a coffin or a vault: "let's say seventy-five guineas, and then we can divide thirty betwixt us. That will make fifteen for your sheer."

"Agreed," said the housekeeper: "but you must send in a regular proper bill, because the Marquis sometimes takes it into his head to look over his accounts."

"Don't be afeard, ma'am. I will put down fifteen guineas for a brick grave, and it shan't be no brick grave at all. Then, how many do you think will attend the funeral?"

"I don't know who will attend it: the Marquis, I suppose—Sir Douglas Huntingdon—just for appearance' sake—and that's all."

"Well, we can put down ten mourners," observed Stimson; "'cause why, the bill must be made out to look respectable. Ten mourners—that will be a guinea each for hat-band and gloves, and a guinea each for the use of mourning cloaks: so there we have twenty guineas at once. Fifteen, as already said, for the brick grave, makes thirty-five. Coffin, fifteen—makes fifty: shell, five guineas—and use of pall, five guineas—there's sixty. Hearse and mourning coaches, ten guineas—that's seventy: and ten of my chaps, half a guinea each—there's five guineas: and that makes up the seventy-five."

"Well, you really are one of the cleverest gentlemen I ever met with," said the housekeeper, with a subdued laugh. "But after all, fifteen guineas a-piece is very little to get out of this business."

"Well," observed Mr. Stimson, "I'll manage to add five to your sheer. Let me see—I said fifteen guineas for the coffin: of course I meant a first-rate oaken one; but I tell you what I'll do—I'll give a common one, painted and grained to look like oak—and that's the way I'll do it. The poor gal there won't be none the wiser."

"Ah! you dear clever fellow," chuckled the housekeeper in a subdued tone: "a man of your talent, Mr. Stimson, ought to have been Prime Minister, instead of an undertaker."

"Well, ma'am, I think I *have* got a little talent," returned Mr. Stimson, with a complacent manner: "but I am wery well satisfied with my wocation, and don't know that I should improve it particular by a change. But I think we have done here all that is required now?"

"One word," said the housekeeper: "when shall the funeral take place?"

"Suppose we say this day week?" suggested the undertaker. "The corpse is a nice fresh 'un," he continued, laying his great heavy rough hand upon Ariadne's cheek, "and won't spile. Besides, it will look better to take plenty of time for the funeral; 'cause why, we are to pretend to have a brick grave and a oak coffin."

"Then let us say this day week," rejoined the housekeeper: and she thereupon quitted the room, accompanied by Mr. Stimson.

Ariadne was once more alone. Alone indeed: but, good heavens! with what hideous, horrible, excruciating thoughts—thoughts that swept like fiery arrows through her brain, conjuring up images from the charnel-house and the grave! Like ghastly spectres treading to the solemn measure of a dirge, did they pass in array before her mental vision. Yes—for she was treated as one that was dead—laid out as a corpse—and had just been an ear-witness to the arrangements devised *for her own funeral!* She had felt the rule of the undertaker taking her measure for a coffin; and she had felt likewise his rough hand laid upon her cheek with the cold brutal indifference of one who is accustomed to handle *the dead!* And then that woman, who had affected so much sympathy in her behalf, was now actually trafficking in her supposed death—trafficking for profit to be derived from the funeral of her whose fate she pretended to deplore. And then that cold-blooded, heartless, hypocritical scoundrel—the undertaker himself—*he* also was making a market of the dead: he also was practising the slimy ways of the money-grubber in respect to the supreme and most solemn rites of mortality and of the Christian faith.

All these circumstances—all these reflections—combined to aggravate, if possible, the horror which previously filled Ariadne's soul: and she

already felt as if she were in the depths of the cold grave, with the clay filled up over the coffin!

Again did the stupor of oblivion enwrap her mind: and when she re-awoke to consciousness utter darkness rested upon her closed eyelids. The silence and the blackness of night entombed her—stupendous night, always fraught with vague and dreamy fears even for those in fullest health, but now marked by ten thousand terrors for her who was alive in the secrecy of her own sensations, but dead to the exercise of all faculties—dead also to the world without!

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

THE TRANCE CONTINUED.

IMMEDIATELY upon quitting Levesnn House, Sir Douglas Huntingdon repaired to Carlton Palace and sought an interview with Venetia. Lady Sackville at once received the Baronet in the breakfast-parlour where she was seated at the time; and pointing towards a newspaper which lay upon the table, she said, "My dear friend, it was with the sincerest sorrow that I read the half dozen lines in that journal which mention the fire at your house last night. It is however a subject of congratulation that you are safe. But you look dreadfully careworn and haggard——"

"No wonder, Venetia," observed the Baronet, "after all that I have gone through."

He then sate down and gave her an account of everything that had transpired within the last two days. Commencing his narrative from the moment when he parted with Louisa Stanley at Dartford, he proceeded to describe the perilous adventures of Shooters' Hill. He told Venetia how circumstances had thrown Ariadne in his way—how she had saved his life at the hut—how they had fled together—and how he had given her an asylum at his own house: he then explained who she was, and in confidence revealed to Lady Sackville's ear those particulars relative to Theodore and his sister which have been made known to the reader in a previous chapter. Lastly, he narrated the circumstances of the young girl's abduction to the Marquis of Leveson's house, and concluded with a description of her death.

At first, when he began to speak of Ariadne, Sir Douglas observed that Venetia's beauteous eyes glittered somewhat with a jealous uneasiness: and naturally flattered by this proof that he was very far from being an object of indifference to the lovely idol of fashion, he cautiously abstained from uttering a word calculated to show that Ariadne had made the slightest impression of a tender character upon his heart. He spoke of her in a tone of compassionate friendship, and speedily observed that a gleam of satisfaction stole over the features of Lady Sackville. But when he came to that portion of his narrative which described Ariadne's death—or rather her supposed death,—when indeed he explained how the sensual brutality of the Marquis of Leveson had been the cause of the lamentable catastrophe—Venetia's splendid countenance coloured with indignation, and she murmured between her set teeth, "That detestable Marquis of Leveson! will the day of retribution never dawn for *him?*"

"And now, my dear Venetia," resumed the Baronet, "I will explain to you in a few words the object of my visit. Indeed you must grant me a boon this moment—you must do me a service without delay——"

"You know, my dear Douglas," she responded, with a peculiar look of mingled tenderness and significancy, "that there is nothing you can demand of me which I am not prepared to grant. Tell me, therefore, how I can serve you. But I think I can already conjecture:—is it not the pardon of Theodore Varian that you require?"

"It is, dearest Venetia—it is," replied the Baronet.

Lady Sackville spoke not another word; but rising from her seat, quitted the room. She remained absent for about an hour, at the expiration of which interval she returned; and by the smile of satisfaction that played upon her charming lips, Sir Douglas saw that she had succeeded.

"This is the pardon—the full, free, unconditional pardon of Theodore Varian," she observed, handing the Baronet a paper. "Fortunately the Secretary of State was with his Royal Highness at the moment; and therefore the document is duly countersigned. I explained to them both a sufficiency of the particulars connected with the case of Theodore Varian to prove that he was as much sinned against by his late master Emmerson, as sinning: and I likewise told them in confidence a little of his poor sister's history. The Minister therefore made not the slightest objection to grant the pardon; and as for his Royal Highness," added Venetia, proudly, "of course *he* was instantaneously prepared to grant my demand."

"Ten thousand thanks, dear Venetia, for this prompt kindness on your part," exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, glancing his eye over the paper ere he consigned it to his pocket. "And now you will excuse me for leaving you abruptly, inasmuch as I am anxious to transmit this pardon to Theodore Varian, together with the letter containing the sad intelligence of his sister's death."

"And do you purpose," asked Venetia, "to veil from Mr. Varian the infamy of the Marquis of Leveson towards his sister?"

"Of what avail, Venetia, will it be to augment the sorrows of this already too unfortunate young man? Besides, I myself have not been immaculate enough in my life to feel justified in becoming the accuser of others; but on the other hand I have so many faults of my own to screen, that I consider it but just to throw a veil if possible over the faults of my friends or acquaintances."

"Well, be it so, Douglas," observed Venetia. "And now depart to execute your purpose with regard to Varian: I will not detain you a minute longer. But remember," she added, with a meaning look, "I shall always be delighted and happy to see you."

"Ah! Venetia, do not fancy that I am not likewise too happy to find myself in your society:"—then hastily raising her hand to his lips, he hurried from the room.

Returning to the hotel where he had taken up his quarters, he sate down and penned a letter to Theodore Varian. In this epistle he broke to the young brother as gently as he could the intelligence of the sister's death, which he attributed to the shock produced by the conflagration upon the previously attenuated mind of the young girl. This

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letter, accompanied by the pardon, Sir Douglas Huntingdon at once sent off by a courier to Dover, in the hope that the messenger might overtake Varian previous to his embarkation for France: but if not, the courier was instructed to lose no time in following the young man to the Continent. Having adopted these measures, Sir Douglas Huntingdon turned his attention to his own affairs: for he felt for the first time in his life the necessity of expelling thought by means of bustle and occupation. Indeed, the image of Ariadne was uppermost in his mind: and frequently, frequently did he find himself giving way to the gloomiest reflections, and pondering upon her whom he had known but for so short a time and who had been so rudely and suddenly snatched away from him, as he thought, *for ever!*

In the evening Doctor Copperas called at the hotel; and on being shown to the room where the Baronet was sitting alone after dinner, the physician expressed himself much shocked at the tidings he had received relative to the death of his fair patient.

"One or two circumstances have rather astonished me in this matter," observed the doctor, as he sate down to take a glass of wine with the Baronet: "one is that the poor girl should have been sent to find an asylum at the house of the Marquis of Leveson, who is an unmarried man—or rather a widower: and the second is that I, being the medical attendant of the young lady, was not called in this morning when she was found to be dying. At all events, if his lordship had not chosen to send for me, he would at all events have acted prudently in summoning that truly wonderful man—the greatest ornament of his profession—I mean Doctor Thurston."

"My good friend," returned the Baronet, "your two objections are very easily met. In the first place, it was necessary to consign the young girl

to the care of some kind-hearted lady; and being acquainted with Lady Ernestina Dysart, I thought it best to send the poor creature to her. Secondly, the Marquis of Leveson was unaware that you were the medical attendant ——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Doctor Copperas: "I am perfectly satisfied with what you have said, my dear Sir Douglas. But perhaps you will permit me to observe that in these cases of rapid sinking and speedy dissolution arising from fright, there are so many curious phases and phenomena that they never ought to be lost sight of by the medical man in attendance at the time. Now I feel perfectly convinced that if that very remarkable authority Dr. Thurston had been called in on this occasion, he would have given to the world a most valuable treatise upon the subject."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was in no humour to converse with so tedious a personage as Doctor Copperas: he accordingly fell into a deep abstraction—and the physician, having dilated for about twenty minutes upon the merits of Doctor Thurston as a medical practitioner, and the learning of Doctor Thurston as a medical authority, took his leave.

A couple of days passed; and the Baronet's confidential domestic James returned from Dover. He had succeeded in finding Theodore Varian, and had delivered to him the messages and the purse of money sent by the Baronet, whose advice it appeared the young man had promptly followed by repairing to Calais. Indeed, James had seen him embark on board the hoy; and thus was it clear that he had quitted England ere being overtaken by the messenger who bore his pardon.

The next day Sir Douglas Huntingdon proceeded to Leveson House to inquire how the preparations proceeded for Ariadne's funeral. The Marquis was not at home at the time; and Lady Ernestina Dysart, who detested the Baronet ever since his interference in the affair of Louisa Stanley, affected to be retained in her own room by indisposition. The housekeeper accordingly took upon herself to answer the Baronet's queries; and she assured him that the most satisfactory preparations were being made. Sir Douglas Huntingdon desired the woman to conduct him to the chamber where Ariadne lay; for he experienced an irresistible longing to behold once more in death that sweet countenance which had made so deep an impression upon him in life. The housekeeper accordingly proceeded to what was believed to be *the chamber of death;* and the moment the Baronet crossed the threshold a feeling of indescribable awe mingled with the profound mournfulness which already filled his heart.

But when he beheld that wax-like countenance on which there was nothing of the ghastliness or loathsomeness of death,—when he beheld it fresh and damask-like as it was in life,—the only appearance of death being the utter absence of all vital tint,—he could not help exclaiming, "Good heavens! surely she does but sleep."

The housekeeper shook her head with an assumed melancholy, as she observed in a low tone, "When no positive disease or previous illness is the cause of death, the corpse frequently remains thus fresh and well preserved."

"Death!—is this indeed death? can it be death?" mused the Baronet, in a low tone to himself, as he stood gazing down upon that countenance so soft in its very rigidity, so sweet in its immovability, so full of ineffable expression in its utter stillness. "If this be death, then death is not terrible: no—'tis nothing but a slumber a little more profound than that into which we sink at night—only, only, to this slumber *here* there is no awakening! This is the eternal night that on earth hath no dawn!"

While thus musing, in a low tone, Sir Douglas Huntingdon had bent over the form of the young girl who lay stretched upon that couch; and a tear dropped from his eyelash upon her cheek. With his cambric handkerchief he gently wiped it away, murmuring between his lips, "Poor Ariadne—poor Ariadne! if you had lived, the feeling which you had already inspired and which I experience now in my soul, would have expanded into the strongest and purest love—and you should have been my wife!"

Then stooping down, he gently kissed her alabaster forehead, and turning abruptly away, hurried from the room, followed by the housekeeper.

If anybody a few days previously had told Sir Douglas Huntingdon that within a week he was destined to be moved by such feelings as these—destined to experience the influence of such melting, chastening, and reforming thoughts trooping through his mind—he would have ridiculed the prophecy and laughed at the prophet. But no man can say how soon the sentiment of love may animate his breast, nor how quickly it may enthrone itself in the sanctuary of the heart!

It was now the afternoon of the fourth day of Ariadne's supposed death; and during this period a profound stupor had entranced her thoughts at such frequent and for such long intervals that her soul, rent with a million tortures when awake, was thus refreshed and invigorated as it were by those periods when its agonies were numbed in syncope and its thoughts steeped in oblivion. But to describe the reflections and the terrors which she experienced when awake, would be to recapitulate that delineation of the feelings which we have previously attempted. We may however observe that occasionally did a gleam of hope penetrate through the murky clouds that girt her soul—a hope that she might yet be enabled to shake off the trammels of this tremendous spell which was upon her and give evidence of her vitality before being consigned to the coffin and buried alive!

She was awake—and she was giving way to this hope at the moment when Sir Douglas Huntingdon paid that visit which has just been alluded to. She immediately recognised his voice as he stood speaking musingly by the side of the couch; and with that keenness of sense which has previously been mentioned, she could hear as plainly all that he said as if he were speaking in a much louder tone—whereas the housekeeper who stood close by, could not catch the meaning of his words. And by a sort of mesmeric influence, also, did Ariadne become aware that he was gazing down upon her. Yes; and it seemed as if through her closed eyelids she could even observe the nature of that look, so full of a mournful tenderness: and then ineffable feelings sprang up in her heart—and when she heard him murmur those words avowing his love and deploring that she had not lived to become his wife, the poor girl felt for a moment as if she were being sud-

denly gifted with the power to cast off the spell of the trance, fling her arms around his neck, weep upon his breast, and prove that she was alive! That was a moment—a single moment of beatific feeling for the unfortunate Ariadne: but the darkest, deepest, blackest despair suddenly seized upon her soul as she felt herself still tied down to that couch—still enchained in motionless rigidity—still cold and lifeless as marble in body, though with a mind that was every instant flaming up with the accumulated violence of a thousand volcanos!

Then she felt the tear-drop upon her cheek. Heavens! it seemed to sink down into her very heart. Oh! that tear!—that tear! it was a pledge of love——Good God! what mockery for her to dream of such bliss as that which is concentrated in the word *love!*

Deeper—yes, deeper, deeper down into the lowest abyss of despair was she plunged, as all hope abandoned her. Then she felt the tear wiped away from her face: then the kiss was imprinted upon her brow;—and then there were sounds of hurried retreating steps—and the door closed again—and she was once more alone. Yes: and once more did she relapse into that stupor which gave her mental energies the means and the leisure to repose, and regain their strength in order to put forth their excruciating vitality again!

When she next awoke she became aware that there was a candle or a lamp in the room. Through her closed eyelids could she distinguish where it was; and then she heard several heavy feet moving about the chamber, though with an evident endeavour that their tread should be as light as possible. A horrible suspicion sprang up in the poor girl's mind; and it was almost immediately confirmed by other sounds which struck upon her ears. These sounds were those of wood coming in contact with wood—one thing being lifted upon another: and then she knew that the undertaker's men were in the room placing the shell upon the tressels!

It instantaneously struck her that if ever the excruciation of her mental agonies should become sufficiently keen to inspire her physical being with new life, this must be the moment. If the asphyxia should now prove stronger than that anguish which was torturing her soul to such an extent as apparently to render it capable of inspiring marble itself with motion, then in that case did it seem as if all hope might be really abandoned. She felt her mind struggling within—or rather she made it struggle with all the violence of desperation to force it as it were to give vent to its feelings in any one of the numerous evidences of life: such as a shudder—a shriek—a stretching forth of the arms—a turning of the head—an opening of the eyelids—or even a quivering of the lips. But no: nothing of all this could she accomplish. Her mind was imprisoned in a form rigid and impracticable as marble: and it seemed to her as if she herself were vainly struggling for emancipation from the interior of a stone sepulchre in which, like a Roman vestal of ancient times, she was walled up!

But we cannot describe the full horror of her thoughts on this head: we must leave the reader much to imagine and depict unto himself. For now the moment—the dread moment had come when Ariadne was to be placed in the shell. It was from habit that the undertaker and his men trod as gently as possible in the room—from habit that they spoke in under-tones suited to the chamber of death—from habit that they laid their hands upon her gently and delicately. It was habit all: for in their nature they were no more susceptible of sympathy than other men. On the contrary—from being in the frequent companionship of the dead, they knew neither awe nor pity. Indeed, their feelings were much blunted and their hearts much brutalized by their avocation: and if a proof of this were wanting, it might have been found in the fact that the housekeeper, knowing their predilection, at this moment entered the room with a tray containing a bottle of spirits and several glasses. Thereupon the undertaker and his men turned away from the couch, and approached the toilette-table where the housekeeper deposited the tray.

"Now, ma'am, will you jine in?" asked Mr. Stimson, as he filled all the glasses round.

"Well, I'll just take a *leetle* drop, so as not to seem unfriendly," said the housekeeper.

"That's right, ma'am. And now," continued Stimson, raising a brimming glass to his lips, "here's your wery good health, ma'am—and here's his lordship's health too—and wishing us all good luck:"—with which benediction the undertaker screwed up his eyes, as if to shut out the fume of the liquor as he tossed it down his throat.

Having refreshed themselves with a dram, the servitors of death returned to the couch, and once more resumed their hold upon Ariadne. Not the concentrated anguish of ten thousand racks—not the essence powerfully condensed of all the most refined excruciations of the Inquisition—can convey any adequate idea of the agony of agonies which the young girl now endured. All such ideas as the coiling of fiery serpents around the form—of burning alive in candescent flames—of tearing off the scalp and dropping boiling oil upon the brain laid bare—of flaying alive and searing the excoriated flesh with red-hot iron—of passing red-hot needles through the eyes, all such ideas as these, we say, fell incomparably short of the illimitable agony endured by the poor girl as the undertaker and his men lifted her from the bed and put her into the narrow shell.

This being done, the men retraced their way to the toilette-table, and regaled themselves with another dram.

"I never did see a corpse keep so fresh," observed Stimson: "there's no oozing out of the mouth—no discolouring under the eyes—not even any particular blueness of the nails. And then, too, she felt as limp and supple as if only in a fit."

"But I shouldn't like to be only half as dead for all that," said one of the men. "Poor thing," he continued, with the mechanical utterance of the sympathetic ejaculation: "she'll be discoloured and blue enough in a few days—and she'll get stark and stiff enough, too, before she's put into her coffin and screwed down."

Screwed down! good heavens, what dreadful words—overwhelming as a torrent, devouring as a conflagration, crushing as a thunderbolt! Life appeared now to be really ebbing away from the statue-like form of Ariadne Varian: and oh! how she wished that she might be really dying—that

her spirit might be indeed passing, so that she could avoid that crowning horror—that transendant catastrophe,—*being buried alive!* Again did a stupor come over her: again were her senses wrapped in oblivion.

The undertaker and his men remained in the room until they had emptied the bottle of spirits; and then they took their leave of the housekeeper and their departure from the mansion.

Presently—she could not tell how long after the stupor had fallen upon her — a roseate radiance appeared to be shining all around Ariadne. She was no longer in the shell—no longer wrapped in the garments of the grave—no longer laid out as a corpse. She felt as if she had been wafted into some other sphere; and a strain of sweet celestial music came floating upon her ears. Then, as those silver octaves made the air melodious, she fancied that she beheld angel-shapes hovering before her eyes—shapes of seraphs and of sylphs, with azure garments and white wings. The music swelled into the divinest symphony, exultant throughout the vast regions of space: and it seemed to the maiden that she was wafted quick and unimpeded, but by some invisible power, through the starry firmament, — mingling with aerial beings of indescribable beauty. An ineffable pleasure pervaded her soul as she called to mind all the horrors from which she had just escaped: for the barrier between life and death seemed to be indeed passed over, and herself emancipated from the trammels of earth and now soaring in heaven. Presently a form of angelic loveliness and radiant with the sunniest smiles, came floating through the roseate atmosphere,—a female form clad in streaming robes of azure and of gold, arranged in alternate foldings and spangled with countless gems. The long yellow hair floated like a beaming meteor, diffusing an enhanced glory all around. But nothing could equal the celestial benignity and seraphic joy that mingled in that beauteous countenance: so that under this angelic figuration Ariadne recollected not immediately the features of her mother—her long dead mother! Now indeed she knew that she was in heaven: and extending her arms towards the advancing shape, she anticipated the next moment to be clapsed to its bosom,—when all in an instant the sweet and ecstatic thoughts filling her soul were turned into horror and dismay — the angel shape vanished from her view—utter darkness suddenly entombed her—and down, down she sank as if into an unfathomable abyss!

Down, down she kept descending: down, down into the blackest darkness, where the only change was that made by hideous shapes blacker than the blackness, darker than the darkness itself! Yes—all was confusion and whirl in her brain—a series and a change of mental agony. Now all of a sudden a tremendous light appeared; and in the distance were seen the inextinguishable but unconsuming fires of hell. No nearer however to them did she approach—but kept falling down, down, far beyond the influence of the molten flames that filled the vast and blazing prison of Satan's kingdom. But as her eyes remained fixed upon that region of fire, she saw that it broke into the shape of immense buildings—vast palaces, tremendous domes, and colossal pillars—all made of the living flame and exhaling the red atmosphere which hung like a lurid cloud above it. Still also as she gazed, she observed the back-ground of that vast city of Satan,—a back-ground forming hills and mountains, some covered with forests, others merely dotted with groups of trees, but all wrought as it were out of the lurid opaque fire. Still keener and keener grew the maiden's power of vision. She now beheld the windows of all the houses, mansions, and palaces in that city of hell; and she saw that those windows were defended by immense bars of fire. But now the entire city seemed to be made of red hot iron,—every feature of the place of one colour—everything formed of one material. And through those bars she beheld myriads of shadowy forms, all red and glowing as if they themselves were penetrated with fire, or heated as it were to a candescent and almost transparent atate. Keener grew her vision still: and she saw more. She beheld ineffable anguish depicted on every countenance—an anguish such as no living language can describe. In the palaces she beheld the shapes of those who had once been the kings and queens of the earth: but their crowns were now of red hot iron, fastened with red hot nails upon their burning but unconsuming heads. Their sceptres had changed into fiery serpents—their orbs into scorpions of flame. The purple, the scarlet, and the ermine robes that decorated them on earth were succeeded by a flowing vesture of flame; and if in any region of hell the fire was hotter and the torture more agonising than elsewhere, then was this supremacy of all excruciations to be found in these palaces of the kings and queens. In the great mansions were the shades of those who had been prelates and church-dignitaries upon earth, and who having made religion a means to heap up wealth and honours for their own aggrandisement, were now deservedly enduring retribution in the ebbless and eternal waves of flame that swept through the mansions of red hot iron. And in other mansions were the lords and those who had been great ones upon earth, but who having made earth a heaven for themselves and a hell for the masses of their fellow-creatures, were now enduring the real hell of the other world!

But gradually all this tremendous spectacle began to fade away from Ariadne's view; and still she appeared to be falling down with the velocity of a flash of lightning—until all was dark once more. Then gradually she awoke to the consciousness that she had been passing through the phases of a dream, wherein she had beholden both heaven and hell!

Then where was she? Were these thoughts—these harrowing thoughts that poured back into her memory, laden with horrible reminiscences,—were all these a dream likewise? Was it a dream that she had been in a trance—that she had been treated as one dead—and that preparations were made for her funeral? Was all this a dream—ah! dared she think so? But, no: great God! no—it was not a dream! She was *there*—in utter darkness—unable to move—pent up in the narrowest possible space: yes—she was in a trance—and she was in her shell!

Another two days passed away; and during the interval very brief indeed had been the moments of consciousness endured by the unfortunate girl. But it was now on the sixth evening of her supposed death, and while she was suffering the tortures of a more vivid sensibility than she had ex-

perienced for forty-eight hours past, that the door of the chamber was opened—and again did the undertaker and three or four of his men enter the apartment. They bore something with them, too—something heavy and also hollow—something that knocked against the wood-work of the doorway as they brought it in—something ominous and dread to think of! Yes—just heaven! it was the damsel's coffin that they brought.

Her coffin!—but she is not dead—the light burns in her soul, although it ceases to shine forth to the view of the world: the lamp is not extinguished—the oil of life is not exhausted. Then wherefore seize upon her now?—wherefore carry her away from the midst of the world to which she belongs, to consign her to the raw damp solitude of the grave? Oh! it is because she is believed to be dead—and thus as a corpse she is to be treated. Now to her mind rush the many things she has heard in her life relative to people being buried alive—of coffins being opened years after the interment, and the wretched inmates being found to have turned on their sides or their faces, or to have gnawed their own flesh for sustenance: and now, just heaven! was such to be her fate?

Speaking of sustenance, reminds us to observe that though several days had elapsed since food had passed Ariadne's lips, yet that she experienced neither hunger nor thirst—no, nor yet that sinking at the stomach which is usually felt through want of nourishment. All vital actions of the system were suspended or suppressed in a physical sense: the body seemed to be dead—all its wants and necessities dead likewise;—and yet all the senses, how keenly were they alive!

Yes—the coffin was brought in and deposited upon the floor. The undertaker and his men then lifted the shell from the tressels, and placed it inside the coffin: they then raised the coffin itself upon the tressels, leaving the lid loosely lying on the top. Scarcely was this done when the door opened again; and the housekeeper entered. Ariadne knew by the rattling of the glasses that the servitors of death were about to regale themselves once more with spirits. Such was the case: but this time the tray was not placed upon the toilette-table—nor on a chair—nor on the bed—nor yet on the chest of drawers—no, nor on any article of furniture in the chamber; but upon the coffin-lid itself! And then the undertaker and his men, together with the housekeeper, all stood round that coffin and drank the spirits which were poured out.

"Well, Mr. Stimson, how do you think the corpse looks now?" asked the housekeeper.

"Unchanged and fresh as ever, ma'am," was the response. "I never did see such a beautiful corpse in all my life. We'll leave the coffin-lid off till the last moment, because the body's so fresh. If we screwed it down, it would precious soon begin to decompose."

Decompose! good heavens, to talk of this in the hearing of one who was not yet dead!

"Well now, the funeral's for the day after to-morrow, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon," observed the housekeeper; "and Sir Douglas Huntingdon has told me that he means to attend—so does the Marquis, out of respect for Sir Douglas."

"Well," replied Stimson, "we shall have two mourning coaches—one for his lordship and the Baronet, and t'other for me and three of my men to look like mourners and make the funeral respectable. I always choose the most sorrowful-looking of my people to go with me in a mourning-coach; and it has a wery good effect. But last time—that was about a month ago—one on 'em tumbled into the grave when we got to the churchyard, 'cause why he got blazing drunk."

"Well, we mustn't have any drunkenness *here*, Mr. Stimson," said the housekeeper, in an authoritative tone: "the Marquis would be in a frightful way if you didn't all keep perfectly sober."

Here the colloquy ended—the liquor was disposed of—the party of death's servitors, together with the housekeeper, retired—and Ariadne was now alone.

Alone—in her coffin!

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

THE COFFIN.

It was the morning of the funeral. The blinds were drawn down throughout the front of the mansion: but no mutes appeared at the door, the obsequies being merely *respectable* and not *fashionable*.

From the period of being placed in her coffin, Ariadne had known but a few minutes of consciousness up to about ten o'clock on the morning of which we are now writing: and then she was awakened as it were from a profound sleep by hearing a strange noise. Gradually did consciousness resume its sway in her soul,—that consciousness which, every time it returned after an interval of stupor, was accompanied by so many harrowing memories—so many poignant reminiscences. But on the present occasion Ariadne was longer than usual in collecting her ideas and marshalling her confused thoughts so as to arrive at the comprehension of the full horror of her position. Indeed, at first she could not possibly conjecture what that strange noise might be—a noise which nevertheless grated so ominously in her ears and jarred against every chord in her heart! It was a fearful noise—a sound well calculated to inspire dread horror even before its full meaning was comprehended. But when the damsel's thoughts settled down into the proper cells of her mind—when her ideas became so disciplined as to take a consecutive order in her memory—then did the chain of her recollections lead her on to the comprehension of this hideous noise that was grating and jarring close by her ears,—and she felt—she knew—she understood that she was being screwed down in her coffin!

Let it not be thought that during the many intervals of consciousness which Ariadne had experienced, from the first moment of her seeming death until the present time,—let it not be thought, we say, that she had forgotten to appeal to that Almighty Being in whom she put her faith. Far from it: all her thoughts during those intervals were a homage to the Deity and were interwoven with a train of reflections constituting a worship. For she had faith—the sublimest faith in the goodness, the wisdom, and the power of the Almighty; and thus was it that occasionally, as we have be-

fore stated, she experienced a gleam of hope—thus was it also that she had been led to dream of heaven. It was not because she experienced bitter, burning moments of agony, excruciating intervals of horror, and fits of the blackest despair,—it was not because she thus felt all the weaknesses of human nature generally and of her own sex in particular, that the reader must suppose she did not pray or that she did not maintain her faith in heaven. She *had* prayed—and she prayed now: in her soul did she pray deeply and fervently while the hideous noise of the coffin-screws grated upon her ears as they secured that lid which now seemed the barrier between herself and all earthly hope!

Her mind still retained a vivid clearness. She could think calmy, collectedly upon the past—upon the awful present—and upon that future in which she put her faith. She hoped that her spirit would soon leave its mortal habitation and fly to those eternal realms whereof she had a glimpse in her dreams. But as yet, although the coffin-lid was screwed down, she experienced no sense of suffocation—doubtless because the faculty of breathing was suspended in that state of asphyxia wherein she was wrapped. But it was from the coming scenes of the tremendous drama that her soul now recoiled so shudderingly,—the lowering into the grave—the shovelling in of the earth—and then the remaining in the clayey depth, perhaps to linger for days and days——Oh! this was the horror, the agony, the anguish!

But while these thoughts were fastening their gnawing vulture-talons upon her brain, the door of the chamber opened, and she almost immediately heard the voices of the Marquis of Leveson and Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Yes—through the coffin—through the shell—through the cerements, penetrated those voices; and *one* sank down—deep down—into her heart!

"Who will accompany us?" inquired Huntingdon, his voice made tremulous with a profound sorrow.

"I know of no one besides yourself and me who can attend as mourners," returned the Marquis. "For appearance' sake, the undertaker and some of his men will follow in a second coach——"

"Appearance' sake!" said the Baronet, bitterly. "But no matter—it must be so. And now, if everything be in readiness——"

Here Ariadne's senses began to fail her—the stupor returned—and she heard no more.

But scarcely had oblivion thus poured its opiate-balm into her soul, when the door of the apartment was opened hurriedly, and a servant made his appearance, saying to the Marquis, "My lord, a young man desires to see either yourself or Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately. He wanted to come up—but I would not let him——"

"Ah! it is no doubt Theodore," interrupted the Baronet.

"What! the brother," murmured the Marquis: then seizing the Baronet forcibly by the arm, he said in a low but rapid and earnest tone, "You will not compromise me—you have promised not to compromise me——"

"No, no," interrupted the Baronet, impatiently: then turning to the domestic, he said, "Let the young man come up."

The servant withdrew: and in less than half a minute the door opened again, and a genteel, good-looking, but careworn and emaciated young man made his appearance. But the moment all the dread emblems of death—the coffin on the tressels—the undertaker and his men creeping about like black snakes, as they prepared the cloaks, put on the hat-bands, and looked out the gloves,—in fine, as all the sombre features of the scene were embraced by that young man at a glance, he staggered against the door-post, and a deep convulsing sob denoted the fulness of his mental agony.

"Mr. Varian, I presume?" said the Baronet, advancing and taking the young man's hand.

"And you are Sir Douglas Huntingdon?" was the tremulous and indeed broken response: but although Theodore could say no more at the instant, yet he pressed the Baronet's hand in token of ineffable gratitude.

"It is a melancholy scene for you, Mr. Varian," continued Sir Douglas; "but you must bear up with becoming fortitude against this affliction."

"Oh! that I had been here in time to fling one last look upon her sweet face—to imprint one last kiss upon her forehead!" murmured Theodore, clasping his hands and sobbing convulsively. "It would not bring her back to life—it would not restore to me my dearly beloved sister: but nevertheless, it would be a satisfaction—a melancholy, mournful satisfaction——"

"Do you really wish it, Mr. Varian?" asked Sir Douglas, deeply moved by the young man's almost heartbroken anguish.

"I do, I do," he answered eagerly. "You know not, sir, how fondly—how devotedly I have loved that dear sister of mine. Ah! sir, it was for her sake that I fell into the ways of error——But let that pass!" he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself as he was reminded by the Baronet's look that there were many strangers in the room; and although they of course knew who he was, since his name had been mentioned on his entrance, yet it was by no means necessary to enlighten them as to all the details of the past.

"Your wish shall be attended to, Mr. Varian," said the Baronet. "It is but reasonable—it is but just; and moreover, it will not detain the funeral procession many minutes:"—then, turning to the undertaker, he said, "Remove that coffin-lid once more—this gentleman is the brother of the deceased."

Mr. Stimson and his men immediately set to work to obey the command they had just received; and in a few minutes the lid of the coffin was lifted away. Theodore Varian then approached, with that species of hesitation and reluctance which characterizes the first glance which a loving one bestows upon the beloved dead: but on reaching the head of the coffin, he stood gazing down fixedly and mournfully upon the beautiful countenance of his sister. Sir Douglas Huntingdon also approached and contemplated the pale wax-like face of Ariadne; and at this moment, doubtless under the influence of the fresh air, the stupor abandoned her again and consciousness returned.

"Behold your sister, Mr. Varian," murmured Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a trembling voice: "how little is she changed, although in death!"

"She looks as if she only slept," returned Theodore, his own voice more tremulous still. "Alas, alas, poor sister! beautiful wast thou in life—beau-

tiful art thou in death: and now thy soul is in heaven!"

Ariadne heard the two voices—the voice of the Baronet and the voice of her brother; and her ear lost not a single syllable that either voice thus uttered. But now those voices ceased, and were succeeded by the stifled sobs that proclaimed all the bitterness of Theodore's anguish. Heavens! would no revulsion now take place in the conditions of her being? Yes—she felt a quivering at the heart—such a sensation as she had not hitherto experienced throughout her trance; and almost at the same instant her brother exclaimed in a tone wild with mingled hope and fear, "Good heavens! her lips moved!"

"Alas, no!" said the Baronet: "it was but the fitful play of a sunbeam through the opening in the window curtain."

"No, no!" cried Varian, in a tone of the most passionate and fervid exultation: "it is no dream—no delusion——There, behold it now!"

"Almighty powers! it is so," exclaimed the Baronet. "She lives—she lives!"

All was now the most extraordinary confusion and excitement in that chamber. Ariadne was lifted out of the shell and placed upon the couch, —a quivering of the lips and a faint, or rather scarcely audible gasping, now being the unmistakable signs of returning consciousness. The undertaker and his men were hurried out of the room with the paraphernalia of death: Lady Ernestina and the housekeeper were summoned thither:—and Sir Douglas Huntingdon himself sped away to fetch Doctor Copperas. Fortunately the physician was at home at the moment; but scarcely had the Baronet explained to him in a few hurried words the resuscitation of Ariadne, when he exclaimed, "I will hurry off to Leveson House at once: but do you proceed to May Fair and fetch that truly eminent man, Doctor Thurston."

Away sped Doctor Copperas in one direction and the Baronet in another. Doctor Thurston was at home: and on being informed by Sir Douglas of what had occurred, he said, "Most fortunate is it that Doctor Copperas has hastened to take the case in hand. There is not another man in England who has such experience in occurrences of suspended animation."

While thus speaking, Doctor Thurston put on his hat and gloves, and accompanied the Baronet to Leveson House, where in the meantime Ariadne had returned to complete consciousness. We need hardly say that the scene which then took place, between the brother and sister thus reunited under such extraordinary circumstances, was touching in the extreme. Theodore strained Ariadne to his breast and covered her with the tenderest caresses. Ernestina and the housekeeper, fearful that some explanation might take place on the part of the damsel relative to the treatment she had received at the mansion, besought Theodore to withdraw, alleging as the reason that this prolonged excitement on the part of Ariadne might be followed by a relapse. But when the young girl beheld the housekeeper at her bedside and caught a glimpse of the Marquis of Leveson at the other extremity of the room, she clung tenaciously to her brother's neck, murmuring in low and broken accents, "Do not go, dearest Theodore—do not leave me—Oh! do not leave me again, I beseech you!"

The brother saw by the affrighted manner in which her azure eyes swept their looks around, that she was in dread of those present; and it instantaneously flashed to his mind that she had perchance experienced some foul play, and that he was not as yet acquainted with *all* the circumstances of her supposed death. Indeed, when first informed, through the medium of the Baronet's letter, that his sister had died beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson, vague and undefined suspicions of evil had sprung up in his imagination; for the name of *Leveson* was known to him as that of a nobleman much addicted to pleasure. This suspicion now appeared to receive confirmation from Ariadne's affrighted manner: but it was not the moment and it was not the place for him to make inquiries into past circumstances. Indeed, he had scarcely time to breathe a few reassuring words in Ariadne's ear, when Doctor Copperas arrived.

The young maiden at once recognised the physician, and welcomed him as a friend. The housekeeper, observing that Ariadne viewed her with evident mistrust and aversion, stole out of the room; and the Marquis speedily followed her. Lady Ernestina however remained; and by at once adopting the kindest, most soothing, and the tenderest manner towards Ariadne, she made a favourable impression both upon the damsel and Theodore. In a short time Doctor Thurston arrived, accompanied by the Baronet; and as Ariadne almost immediately inquired of the latter concerning the excellent and kind-hearted Mrs. Barnes, he at once volunteered to go and fetch her. Ariadne expressed her joy and gratitude at the proposal: and Sir Douglas accordingly sallied forth again, while the medical men adopted such measures as their skill suggested to guard against a relapse on the part of the resuscitated maiden.

In about twenty minutes the Baronet returned with Mrs. Baines; and affecting to a degree was the meeting between that worthy woman and Ariadne. Indeed, Mrs. Baines declared her intention of remaining at Leveson House to act as the damsel's nurse until her complete restoration to health; and thus the now happy girl found herself the object of the kindest attentions and surrounded by friendly faces.

But in the meantime the Marquis of Leveson and his own housekeeper were seriously alarmed lest Theodore Varian should learn sufficient from his sister's lips to induce him to make an exposure of their infamous treatment towards her. Sir Douglas Huntingdon, however, presently sought an opportunity of speaking to the Marquis upon the subject.

"Ariadne is now past all danger of a relapse," he said. "The physicians have left her for the present; and she remains in the care of my housekeeper, Mrs. Baines. Of course the chamber which she occupies in your house must be her home until her health will permit her removal elsewhere. Her brother is now about to accompany me to my hotel, that we may have some conversation together. He already suspects that his sister has experienced ill-treatment of some kind; and therefore it is my intention to tell him all the truth at once. But I trust that by my earnest re-

commendation he will be induced to pass over, if not actually to forgive or forget, your conduct towards his sister. Exposure will benefit no one; and innocent though she be, would nevertheless wound the delicacy of Miss Varian herself. Her brother will doubtless admit the justice of this reasoning; and therefore I do not think that you need labour under any apprehension of his vengeance."

"I thank you much—most sincerely—for these assurances," said the Marquis. "Pray make my peace with the young man; and tell him that if a few hundred pounds will be of any service——"

"I am very much mistaken," interrupted the Baronet, with ill-concealed disgust, "if Theodore Varian be not quite a different person——"

"Well, well, there's no harm in mentioning the money matter," said the Marquis, painfully anxious to avoid exposure on any terms; for he knew full well that if it became noised abroad that his house contained such auxiliaries to his sensuality as the mechanical chairs, the indignation of the populace would be so excited that his life would not be safe. "But you and I, Huntingdon," he added,—"on what terms are we to remain in future?"

"Lord Leveson," said the Baronet, in a tone that was rather sorrowful than angry, "I am not enough of a saint myself to enable me to take up stones to cast at you: but at the same time I think that there are extremes into which it is possible to plunge in the gratification of one's passions—and deep into those extremes have you been hurried."

With these words the Baronet turned away; and quitting the room, he joined Theodore Varian, who was waiting for him in the hall. The two left the house together—the young man feeling fully satisfied that in Mrs. Baines his sister had a tender nurse as well as a careful guardian and a true friend.

As for Mr. Stimson—he and his men, amidst wonder and amazement at the resuscitation, bore away all the paraphernalia of death: but as the bill was promptly paid by Lord Leveson, the undertaker found nothing to complain of.

And now, ere closing this chapter, we must state that Dr. Copperas, on returning home, sate down to pen a detailed account of the case of resuscitation, in the course of which he declared "that his treatment of it was materially assisted by the advice of that truly remarkable man, Doctor Thurston:" while, on the other hand, Doctor Thurston likewise sate down to pen *his* narrative, which he interlarded with many compliments to "that ornament of his profession, Doctor Copperas." These statements appeared respectively in the next Numbers of the *Scalpel* and the *Spint*, and created a marvellous sensation throughout the medical world.

CHAPTER XC.

MOTHER FRANKLIN.

It will be remembered that the Hangman and Bencull had resolved, after due consultation, to make away with the formidable Bow Street officer, Mr. Lawrence Sampson. Their project was to entice him, by some means or another, down to the dark crib in Jacob's Island, where three or four of the gang would lie in readiness to put the murderous scheme into execution; while the Hangman himself was to call at Larry's house in Long Acre on some pretence and get possession of the Police-Book. With a view to the effectual carrying out of this plan, Nell Gibson had been selected as the most fitting instrument of the plotters; and at the same time the Buttoner had been appointed as a spy upon her actions.

It was necessary to remind the reader of these particulars: and we must add that although the Hangman's gang subsequetly discovered certain proofs of what they believed to be Nell Gibson's treachery towards them in respect to their dealings with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, they had agreed, after calm deliberation, to conceal their knowledge of the young woman's additional perfidy in respect to the note which had been intercepted by the Buttoner. To that resolve they had come, as we described at the time, with a view to ascertain whether she were also betraying them with respect to the plot initiated in reference to Larry Sampson.

It was now a week since the memorable night of the fire; and if, at about six o'clock in the evening, we peep into Mr. Lawrence Sampson's comfortable parlour at his house in Long Acre, we shall behold him sitting by the fire reading a book and discussing a glass of wine. Presently the door opened; and his housekeeper, Dame Margery, came to announce that a very old woman, who refused to give her name, wished to speak to him. The Bow Street Officer, who never refused to see any body on business, at once desired that she should be admitted: and accordingly the visitant was shown into his presence.

Dame Margery withdrew; and Larry Sampson instantaneously recognised the old harridan, who, bent double with age, now advanced towards him, shaking her head and wagging her toothless jaws with a horrible kind of mysterious significancy.

"Do you know who I be?" she asked, in a voice something between a cackle and a squeak.

"Yes—to be sure," responded Larry: "you are Mother Franklin—and you live over at Mrs. Young's in Bermondsey. Now then, what do you want with me."

"Ah! I thought as how you would know who I was," said the old woman, with a merry laugh, which nevertheless struck hideous upon the ear. "You know every body, Mr. Sampson—and every body knows you."

Thus speaking, Mother Franklin took from her pocket a round snuff-box with an indecent picture upon the lid; and while regaling herself with a pinch, some of the snuff got into her throat, thereby exciting so painful a cough that it seemed as if the old hag was about to choke, while the scalding rheum poured down her wrinkled cheeks, leaving her eyes horribly red and bleared. She was wrapped in an old dingy red cloak, with the hood drawn over her head; and she walked with a stick. Her whole appearance was therefore not unlike that of one of the lowest and most wretched class of vagabond fortune-tellers: and now, as she stood shaking from head to foot with that prolonged hacking cough, Larry Sampson could scarcely avoid turning away from her in disgust.

"Well, what is it you want with me?" he inquired again, after a sufficient pause to allow the harridan

to recover from the effects of the snuff getting into her throat.

"I can do you a service, Mr. Sampson," she said, now taking a seat: "a wery great service too, I can assure you."

"But it is doubtless to do yourself a service at the same time, Mother Franklin," observed Larry: "or else you would not come to me. Therefore pray get to the point at once, and tell me what you want."

"There's a plot agin you, Mr. Sampson—a deep-laid plot," said the old woman, looking at him significantly with her bleared eyes: "and if you don't mind, it will be the wuss for you—that it will!"

"Ah! I am constantly hearing of plots and schemes against me," observed the Bow Street officer, with an air of indifference: "but you see I survive them all. However, if you have really anything to tell me, do it quickly—describe your motives in thus putting me on my guard—and also say what reward you expect."

"The reward I shall leave to you, Mr. Sampson," replied the old harridan; "for I know you will treat me well. I shall be eighty-nine come next Febiverry; and that's a age which you won't treat with disrespect. But I say now, hasn't that Gibson gal been three or four times with you?"

"Just so," replied Sampson. "What then?"

"She's playing you false, sir," resumed Mother Franklin: "it's all a plant of the Hangman's and Bencull's, I can promise you."

"I had my suspicions, I can assure you," observed Sampson, with his habitual coolness. "Go on."

"I'll tell you all—but it will be best to begin at the beginning. Well, sir, one day the Hangman called at your house—this wery house, I mean," continued the old hag; "and somehow or another

he managed to get into a secret room of your's where there's a many dresses—and he also saw a great big book that you've got and where you write down everything that happens. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, shaking her head significantly; "you see *I* know something worth *your* knowing—and you also see, by the same token, that I am telling the truth. Well, in that great book the Hangman read a many things, and all about your dressing up yourself as a knife-grinder and going down to Folly Bridges—that's Jacob's Island, you know—and getting chucked into the ditch. So, you see, the Hangman found out that you know a good deal too much to suit him and the rest of the gang; and so he has planted Nell Gibson upon you to 'tice you down to the dark crib, where you'll be done for: and at the same time the Hangman means to come here to your house and get hold of the great book, so that it mayn't fall into the hands of any other Bow Street runner."

Larry Sampson certainly was very far from being prepared for all this information: but he outwardly manifested no surprise. Surprised he however really was, to hear that Daniel Coffin had managed to obtain admission to his secret chamber: but what he was now told in respect to Nell Gibson, only confirmed certain suspicions which he had previously entertained relative to the purport of three or four visits which she had paid him.

"Now, Mrs. Franklin," he said, "I see that you are telling me the truth; and here's ten guineas for you," added Larry, counting the gold pieces down upon the table. "The next thing you must do is to let me know how you happened to discover all that is going on, and why you now come and betray the matter to me. Do this, and you shall have another ten guineas upon the spot."

For years and years past, the wages of crime had not been so abundant at any one period, for Mother Franklin, as the harvest which she was now reaping; and with a chuckle of delight she secured the first ten guineas about her person, and then proceeded to give those explanations that should ensure to her the second two guineas.

"Well, Mr. Sampson," she said, "the truth is that Nell Gibson has always been harsh and bitter towards me; and I hate her—I have long hated her. Then the Hangman, too—he jeered, and taunted, and laughed at me one night; and I swore to be revenged—for I hate him also. So, seeing that he had something secret to say to Nell Gibson, I listened at the door. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, with her hideous cackle: "my ears were sharp enough *then*, I can tell you; and as luck would have it, no one disturbed me in the passage all the time I was listening at the door. So I heard everything that passed: that's how I came to know what was going on. Ever since—for this was more than three weeks ago—just at the beginning of November—ever since then, I say, I have listened, and watched, and peeped, and peered, at all that was going on; and what with catching a word now and a word then, and hearing a bit of a whispered conversation at one time and a bit at another, I found out that the plot was still going on again you—that Nell Gibson has been to you several times with a rigmarole tale—and that she fancies you are quite falling into the snare. Well, Mr. Sampson, she's coming up to you to-night; and so I managed to get away for a couple of hours on some excuse, just to give you this warning. But if you want again to know why I do it, it is because I hate the Hangman—I hate Nell Gibson also. *She* has called me a witch—and *he* has called me a beldame; and *she* threatened to leave Mother Young's establishment if I didn't hold my tongue—and *he* tossed me a shilling—a beggarly shilling—as if I was a beggar! And so for all this," shrieked forth the hag, raising her voice in a horrible excitement, "I want revenge—I want revenge—and now I shall get it!"

The thrilling querulous tone to which her accents had risen, soon merged into a cough, so sharp and convulsing that it almost seemed to shatter the old witch to pieces: and a horrible spectacle was she with her toothless jaws wagging, her head shaking, and the scalding rheum pouring out of her bleared eyes.

"Ah! I could let you into a many secrets if I chose, about the Hangman, and Nell Gibson, and all the rest of the precious gang," continued the hag: "and I will do it soon too—for they've all took to bullying and baiting me just because I am a poor old woman that will be eighty-nine come next Febiverry. But here's one thing I'll tell you, Mr. Sampson: but pray mind and never say that you heard anything from my lips, or that I peached against them folks——"

"Oh! that is an understood thing between you and me," exclaimed Sampson. "Proceed, Mrs. Franklin, with what you were about to tell me."

"Well, sir," she resumed, "from a conversation that I overheard it seems that it was the Hangman's party which caused the fire at some Baronet's t'other night——"

"Ah! Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, you mean," interjected Sampson. "But how was that?"

"Why," returned the old hag, "the fellows got into the stable with the intention of breaking into the other part of the house; but somehow or another their lantern broke, and the light falling on some hay or straw, set the whole place into a blaze. Ha! ha! all their wickednesss shall come out soon; I'll unmask them, the villains—I will!" she cried, again exalting her voice into a querulous thrill. "But I can't stay any longer now. I must get back as soon as possible. Another time I'll tell you more. At all events, I've told you enow for the present to put you on your guard against your enemies, Mr. Sampson."

Having thus spoken, the harridan received the second ten guineas, and took her departure, mumbling to herself, "Ha! now I shall be revenged. Daniel Coffin said he should have the satisfaction of tucking me up before he died; but I shall have the pleasure of seeing him swing to the gallows-tree—ha! ha! ha!"

About an hour afterwards Nell Gibson was ushered by Dame Margery into the presence of the Bow Street Officer.

"Well, it is for to-night," said the young woman, the moment the housekeeper had retired and she found herself alone with Larry Sampson.

"Ah! it is for to-night, eh?" he said, affecting to fall most credulously into the snare spread to enmesh him. "And where is the conference to take place?"

"Down at Bencull's dark crib," replied Nell

Gibson, fixing a searching glance upon Sampson so as to penetrate into the depths of his soul and thus assure herself that he really suspected nothing.

"Now, let us understand the whole thing thoroughly, so that there may be no mistake," he observed, motioning Nell Gibson to take a seat and handing her a glass of wine. "According to what you have previously told me, the Hangman's gang contemplate some desperate and astounding deed of villany, the nature of which is however unknown to you. They have already had two or three consultations, from which you have been excluded; and now to-night the last consultation is to be held, to settle the whole plan and arrange all the proceedings. Is not this it?"

"That is exactly how the matter stands, Mr. Sampson," replied Nell Gibson.

"Well, then," resumed the Officer "you must now tell me all over again exactly what you propose; because having a great many different things to think of, I may not perhaps exactly remember all you have said to me at our previous interviews."

"I can explain myself over again in a very few words," said Nell Gibson. "You must understand that at the back of the dark crib there is a sort of gallery, overlooking the ditch——"

"Yes—and overhanging it also," interrupted Sampson. "After you came to me on the first occasion, I went down to the Folly Bridges and took a survey of the place. Of course I had often been there before; but after what you told me I thought it best to get an accurate idea of the locality. And now please to continue your explanations."

"Since you have been down to the place to look at it so particularly," resumed Nell, "you may have noticed that if you get on the wooden bridge you can easily climb along to the gallery at the back of the dark crib; and there you can lie concealed, listening at the window to all that takes place inside the back room."

"Well, the plan is feasible enough," observed Sampson, steadily and composedly meeting the keen and penetrating look which Nell Gibson fixed upon him from beneath her eyelids; and thus while she fancied that he did not perceive how intently though furtively she was watching him, he not only saw that he was thus scrutinized, but also encountered the scrutiny without exciting a suspicion. "And how many do you think will be there to-night?" he inquired.

"Ah! there will be several of them," answered Nell Gibson: "for the best part of the gang are in this business; and that's the reason why I know it must be something of the utmost importance."

"And have you failed to wheedle the secret out of the Buttoner? for he is your fancy man, I believe," said Larry Sampson.

"The Buttoner is as close as the door of Newgate and as down as the knocker itself," replied Nell. "When he was drunk I have tried to pump him; but it was all no go. Besides which, the Buttoner never will trust a woman; and so if he did tell me anything, it couldn't be relied on as true—it would only be some invention of his to put me on a wrong scent. But I know that whatever the business now in hand may be, there's murder in it—and also the hope of an immense booty——"

"And how do you know this?" inquired Sampson.

"Because the Buttoner cleaned up his pistols this morning, and sharpened the blade of a hideous clasp-knife that he's got. He didn't think I paid particular attention to what he was doing: but I did though. Moreover, I dropped in, quite in a leisurely way, at the dark crib this afternoon; and I saw Bencull busy examining his pistols also. The Mushroom Faker arrived at the dark crib last night, and brought his pistols with him—and I heard him say in an under-tone to Bencull something about its being very probable that they should soon have more money than they would possibly know what to do with."

"But could not you by some means or another secrete yourself in the gallery behind the dark crib and hear what is going on to-night?" asked Sampson, raising a sort of objection merely to prevent Nell Gibson from thinking that he fell too readily into the snare.

"If I could, you may depend upon it I would," she answered: "but it's impossible. I must get back now as quick as I can to Mother Young's; and I shan't be able to stir out again all the evening. No, Mr. Sampson—this is a thing that you must take in hand yourself: and remember that when I first came to you, our solemn understanding was that whatever took place between us was not to be communicated to a third person. But I must be off now," she exclaimed, rising from her seat as she heard a clock in another room striking eight.

"But I have not yet given you any portion of the reward that you stipulated for," observed Sampson.

"I will come for it when the business is over," said Nell Gibson. "Besides, the best and most welcome reward that I can have, is to revenge myself for the ill-treatment of the Buttoner—the insulting taunts of the Hangman, because I refused to submit to his wishes—and the coarse brutality of that detestable Bencull. In fact, Mr. Sampson, as I have told you before, I have a thousand wrongs to avenge against those villains; and now is the time."

"Yes—there shall be ample revenge for you, Miss Gibson," observed Larry. "Whatever these fellows plot and plan to-night, shall send them all to the scaffold. But what time will they be assembled in their ruffian conclave?"

"At about eleven o'clock," returned Nell. "If you secrete yourself in the gallery at that hour, it will be ample time."

"And you are certain that there is no danger of any of the fellows going out into that gallery?"

"Not a bit of it," responded Nell Gibson: "you will not incur the slightest peril."

The young woman then took her departure: and when she was gone, Larry Sampson thought within himself, "The plot is a clumsy one; and even without Mother Franklin's warning, I should not have fallen very readily into the snare. But that Nell Gibson is a clever and a cunning girl, and performs her part well. However, she and her comrades will all be astonished at the lesson I shall read them to-night."

The Bow Street Officer then resumed the perusal

of his book with as much calmness and composure as if nothing extraordinary were on the *tapis*: but at about half-past nine o'clock he prepared to sally forth,—having previously, however, given some special instructions to his housekeeper relative to the mode in which *a certain person* was to be received during his absence.

Meantime the Hangman, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker, were all assembled at the dark crib in company with Bencull. This precious company were seated in that same room at the back to which our readers have been previously introduced; and the table was as usual covered with the materials for drinking and smoking—or, as the men themselves expressed it, "a regular booze."

"Well, do you still think your blowen is staunch in this matter?" asked the Hangman, addressing himself to the Buttoner.

"I have no reason as yet to think otherwise," was the response. "But of course, after the tricks she has already played us, it is impossible to say. She ought to be back by this time; and then we shall see what she says."

"And if she did mean to betray us in any way, how should we know it?" asked Bencull.

"She can't betray us into Sampson's power for anything particular we are doing at this moment," observed the Hangman. "All the harm she can do, is to put him up to snuff respecting our intentions towards him; and in that case of course he won't come down and hide himself in the gallery."

At this moment a knock was heard at the street-door; and Bencull, hastening to answer the summons, gave admittance to Nell Gibson. The young woman entered the back room with her wonted calmness and self-possession. Indeed, there was no reason why she should look or feel otherwise; inasmuch as so far from contemplating any treachery in the present instance, she had faithfully and as she believed, *successfully*, performed her part in the drama now in progress.

"It is all right," she said, taking a seat next to the Buttoner. "Larry Sampson, having nibbled at the bait for the last three weeks, has now swallowed it completely; and he will be in that gallery at eleven o'clock to-night."

"And you don't think he suspects anything, Nell?" said the Hangman inquiringly, as he looked at her intently from beneath his overhanging brows.

"I am sure he does not," she answered, with perfect composure. "Or if he does, then is he the greatest adept at concealing his thoughts that I ever saw in all my life."

"Well, of course, he is all that," growled Bencull; "but I should have thought that you was more experter still, Miss Nell, and so you might have seen whether he took it all in for gospel or not."

"Again I tell you," said the young woman, now speaking somewhat impetuously, "that as far as I could possibly judge, Larry Sampson believed I was performing a real part. But I suppose that after what occurred on Shooters' Hill, you mean to suspect everything I do, and every word I speak? Now, then, I tell you again, and for the last time, that you are wrong! I tried to save Huntingdon because he was the first man—in fact the only man I ever loved: and what I did the other night I would do over again; for I wouldn't have a hair of his head injured. But in other matters I would die sooner than betray you—yes, by God! I would die first."

And having worked herself up to a pitch of powerful excitement, she struck her clenched hand so forcibly upon the table that bottles and glasses and tobacco-pipes all danced and rattled as if the floor of the room was upheaving with an earthquake.

"Come now, Nell, none of this nonsense," said the Buttoner: "we ain't suspecting you at the present moment. In fact han't we promised to look over what you did t'other night on Shooters' Hill, if so be we saw that you proved faithful in the little business now in hand?"

"Well, and you *will* see too," returned Nell Gibson sulkily. "But I suppose you don't want me to wait any longer?"

"No," replied the Buttoner: "you can be off and get back to Mother Young's. There's enough of us here to do the business without you. But here—take a drop of summut short first:"—and he handed her a glass of spirits.

"Well, here's success to you," said Nell, her good humour returning—and she tossed off the burning alcohol: then replacing the glass on the table, she took her departure.

"I raly don't know what to make of that gal," said the Buttoner after a brief pause. "I have been her flash man for the last three weeks, and can't understand her yet."

"She's as deep and artful as the devil," said Bencull, "and that's why I first of all recommended her in this job. But if so be she should turn her artifice against us——"

"Then, by Satan! she shall suffer for it," exclaimed the Hangman, rising from his seat and buttoning up his coat.

"Aye, that she should," said the Mushroom Faker.

"And I would help to do for her," added Bob the Durrynacker.

"Well, we shall know more about it presently, I dare say," observed the Hangman. "And now I am off up to Long Acre to call at Larry's and see if I can get hold of the police book. I hope when I come back in two or three hours or so," he added, with a look ominously ferocious, "I shall hear that Larry Sampson is deep down at the bottom of the ditch."

Then jerking his thumb significantly over his shoulder towards the window, the Hangman put on his hat and quitted the room.

Bencull, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker now remained together at the dark crib, smoking and drinking, and conversing on the business which they had in hand. Once or twice Bencull went out to the street door, to ascertain, as he expressed himself, "what sort of a night it was;" and returning on each occasion to his companions to report that the moon was coming out clearer and brighter, they with one accord regretted that it was not pitch dark, considering the enterprise they had in progress. For although none of the inhabitants of Jacob's Island might be supposed to be over particular, yet it was somewhat too serious an affair to have the eyes of neighbours catching a glimpse of any murderous proceeding by the aid of moonlight. But this

risk must however be run; and the four ruffians made up their minds accordingly.

After repeated references to a huge silver watch which he carried in his fob, Mr. Bencull at last intimated that it was now eleven o'clock; and the Buttoner was just suggesting that they should wait another quarter of an hour before rushing out into the gallery, when a knock was heard at the street door.

"Who can that be?" said Bencull, in a tone of vexation. "Perhaps old Jeremy Humpage—or the Swag Chovey Bloak——"

"Well, whoever it is," interrupted the Buttoner, "he mustn't be let into our secrets. Tell him there's summut wery partickler and private going on——"

"Oh! leave me to make an excuse," growled Bencull; and taking up the light he went to the door.

But no pen can describe the mingled astonishment and dismay which seized upon him, when the flickering rays of the candle fell upon the countenance of Mr. Lawrence Sampson!

CHAPTER XCI.

THE RESULTS OF THE PLOT.

"Ah! Bencull, how are you?" said the Bow Street official, in an easy off-hand manner. "The fact is that I wanted to have a word or two with you, and thought this as good a time as any."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sampson unceremoniously entered the house—passed by Bencull—and proceeded straight to the room at the back. Bencull, recovering somewhat from his astonishment, hastily shut the door and followed close behind,—the light which he carried revealing the person of the new-comer to the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker. These individuals were as much astounded as the landlord of the place had been, on beholding the object of their murderous purpose thus familiarly and coolly appear before them. He was attired in his usual manner, and had his hands thrust into the depths of his capacious breeches'-pockets.

Entering the room and throwing himself leisurely upon a chair, Mr. Sampson glanced around him with a peculiar smile, observing, "Well, there are no strange faces here. I have had the pleasure of being acquainted with every one of you for a long time past—personally at least, if not to speak to."

There was a slight accent of irony in his tone and a similar expression in his look; so that the four ruffians exchanged dubious and inquiring glances with each other, as much as to say, "What on earth does all this mean?" Indeed, they knew not what to think nor what to do; but with a sort of consternation upon them, they awaited in silence for Larry Sampson to explain himself farther.

"Now, my good friends," resumed the officer, pushing his chair back against the wall so that no one could get behind him, and then lounging in it with an easy and confident manner, as if he felt assured that though in the lion's den, he was perfectly safe;—"now, my good friends," he repeated, "don't you think that all your united wisdom—especially when combined with that of Daniel Coffin—should have devised some scheme more feasible and likely-looking than this clumsy affair which you have trumped up to ensnare me?"

"Trapped, by goles!" exclaimed Bencull, his countenance becoming black as thunder.

"Nosed upon, as sure as fate!" muttered the Mushroom Faker.

"Done brown!" added Bob the Durrynacker, also in an under-tone.

"Perdition seize that Nell Gibson!" murmured the Buttoner between his set teeth, as he clenched his hands with convulsive violence,—his mind being already intent on a horrible revenge for what he supposed to be the perfidy of his mistress.

"Need I tell you what ridiculous figures you cut?" resumed Larry Sampson, secretly enjoying their confusion: "but I only wish that your accomplice Nell Gibson was here to see how completely all her artifices have been penetrated by me. As for your friend the Hangman, I suppose he has gone up to my house in the hope of obtaining possession of my secret register. He will be miserably disappointed," added the officer drily.

"You are talking the Chinese langvidge, Mr Sampson," growled Bencull, endeavouring to put a good face on the matter, if possible. "We don't understand you: there ain't no plot—no scheme—no nothink——"

"Denial is useless, my good fellow," interrupted the officer. "You expected that I should be concealed in the gallery outside here at eleven o'clock: but instead of that, I thought it would be better to drop in as I have done, and tell you to beware in future how you plot against me. After the glimpse which the Hangman obtained of my secret book one day, he should have known that there are few things done in London which escape my knowledge: and perhaps you will be surprised when I tell you that the origin of the fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's House a week ago is known to me——"

"Then, by goles!" shouted Bencull, starting from his seat, "there's no doubt as to who——"

"No doubt at all!" exclaimed the Buttoner, dashing his clenched fist violently against the table.

"Patience, patience," said Larry Sampson, coolly. "I tell you that it is vain and useless for you to conjecture how I obtained my information. Every crime committed in London is known to me; and the authors of it are likewise known: but it doesn't always suit my purposes to bring them *at once* to justice:"—then fixing his eyes upon Bencull and the Buttoner, he said, "You two men and Daniel Coffin were the authors of that fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's! You forced an entrance into the stable with the intention of breaking into the dwelling-house; but the light fell from your lantern, and the place was soon in a blaze. Is this true? or is it not? Fools!" ejaculated Larry Sampson, contemptuously; "if such a mysterious circumstance as that is known to me in all its details, how do you think that this miserable clumsy murder-plot of your's could escape my knowledge?"

Bencull and the Buttoner now exchanged looks of gloomy alarm: for they felt persuaded that they were about to be apprehended on account of the burglary and fire at the Baronet's;—while the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker likewise fancied that such was to be their two comrades'

fate. Indeed all four villains made sure that the dark crib was surrounded by Sampson's runners; and for this reason they did not offer to lay a finger upon the formidable functionary himself.

"Although such a pack of hang-dog scoundrels as you," resumed Larry, "deserve no mercy at my hands, yet I do not mind putting you at your ease in one respect: and that is," he continued, addressing himself particularly to Bencull and the Buttoner, "I do *not* mean to take you two up, nor yet your friend the Hangman, for that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Not that I am over desirous to show you any leniency, but because I cannot make use of the evidence I have obtained to bring the deed home to you. So now," he added, "let me give you a word of warning—which is, that if you don't break up your gang, get out of London, and disperse over the country as quick as possible, I will hunt you all to the gibbet. Now I have given you fair warning: and I hope you will be wise enough to take it."

"And what's to prevent us from knocking you on the head and shoving you out into the ditch?" exclaimed the Buttoner, suddenly struck with the idea that if Larry Sampson had not come thither for the purpose of effecting any arrests, it was very probable he was unattended by his myrmidons.

"You will not attempt any such thing," answered Sampson coolly; "because in the first place I should shoot you through the head;"—and as he spoke he drew forth his hands from his capacious pockets, each hand being armed with a double-barrelled pistol. "Moreover," he continued, "if you just tap at that window, three or four of my men will rush in from the gallery: and at the first report of one of these pistols, half-a-dozen more of my runners will break into the house from the street. So now you are forewarned of the consequences of any attempt to molest me."

The Buttoner sank down upon his chair again in gloomy sullenness; and Bencull, lighting a pipe, puffed away with the air of a man who feels himself in unpleasant circumstances, but endeavours to appear as unconcerned as possible. As for the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, they tossed off frequent bumpers of spirits, doubtless to arm themselves with courage for any emergency that might ensue. But Mr. Sampson in reality seemed to have no inclination to push matters to the extreme on the present occasion; and replacing his pistols in his pocket he said, "Now, Mr. Bencull, I will thank you to go first and open your street-door for me."

The landlord of the dark crib was too well pleased at this command not to obey it with alacrity; and the Bow Street Officer issued forth from the den of infamy. Immediately upon emerging into Mill Street, he blew a whistle with a peculiar note of shrillness; and Bencull, keeping the door ajar in order to watch till the "enemy" had departed, perceived that this was the signal for the runners to leave the vicinage of the dark crib. Larry Sampson passed up the street; and one after the other Bencull counted no less than eight runners whom he recognised as they followed at short intervals. Then, when the coast was once more clear, he shut the door and returned to the room where his three companions had remained.

"Betrayed—basely betrayed!" he growled forth as he replaced the light on the table and flung himself upon the bench.

"Yes, and there's no doubt as to who's betrayed us," said the Buttoner. "Nell Gibson alone could have peached about that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. I dare say instead of having gone back to Mother Young's, she's cut and bolted. But at all events I'll go and see."

"No, stay here, old feller," exclaimed Bencull: "let's do nothing hastily—for there's no telling how Larry may have his eye upon us. At all events let's see whether the Hangman comes back—and if so what he says."

This advice was adopted; and the four ruffians applied themselves with renewed energy to the spirits and tobacco, in order to cheer their minds after the scene that had just taken place, the particulars of which afforded them ample food for discussion till about half-past twelve o'clock, when the Hangman returned.

Bursting with the fury of his pent-up feelings, the diabolical nature of which was reflected upon his countenance, Daniel Coffin no sooner entered the little room than he demanded what had taken place. In a few hurried words the required explanations were given; and he in his turn was then called upon to describe how he had fared in Long Acre.

"By Satan! I scarcely know that I shall have patience enough to tell you," he exclaimed, his naturally hang-dog countenance suddenly assuming a look so truly diabolical that even his companions felt their blood run cold in their veins for a moment. "But however, let me try and compose myself to a task that is ten thousand times more unpleasant than tucking up a feller at the Old Bailey. Well, on reaching Long Acre a little after eleven, I knocked at Sampson's door, and Dame Margery—that's his old housekeeper, you know—almost immediately opened it. '*Pray, ma'am,*' says I, '*is Mr. Sampson at home?*' just for all the world as if I hadn't the least idea that he was out.—'*No, sir, he is not,*' says she in such a civil manner that I really thought the old girl didn't recollect who I was: but she speedily undeceived me on this point, saying, '*I think you are Mr. Coffin, if I mistake not?*'—'*Well, ma'am,*' says I, '*Dan'el Coffin is my name for want of a better. But it's very provoking that Mr. Sampson is out; for I want to speak to him very particular.*'—'*I think he said he was going down to Jacob's Island,*' observes the old housekeeper; and you may be assured that I was deuced glad to hear this, because of course I felt certain that he had fallen into the trap.—'*Do you think he will be long, ma'am?*' says I.—'*I dare say a couple of hours,*' she answered: '*but can't you call back again? or else perhaps you will walk in and wait till he comes home?*'—'*Well, ma'am,*' says I, not appearing to catch too greedily at the offer, although it was just what I wanted, '*perhaps that's the best thing I can do.*'—'*Walk in, then, sir,*' says Dame Margery, so polite and civil and simpering I never saw anything like it: and so she showed me into the breakfast-parlour and there left me. I let about ten minutes elapse; and then thinking that the coast must be clear, I took a candle—stole out of the parlour—crept up the stairs—and was within half-a-dozen steps of the landing, when lo and behold! the light of the candle suddenly showed me three Bow-street runners sitting on the top step,

each with a brace of pistols in his hands! You may easily suppose that I was taken so aback I didn't know what the deuce to do; while a voice seemed to whisper in my ears, '*You are betrayed! you are betrayed!*' The three runners burst out laughing; and one of them cried, '*Holloa, Daniel! what are you doing here?*'—'*Why, I only walked up in a fit of absence of mind,*' says I, no better excuse coming into my head at the instant: '*but what are you doing here?*'—'*Oh! only mounting guard over the police-book, which somebody or another has vowed to possess himself of to-night. But of course such a respectable gentleman as you, Mr. Coffin, can't have come here for any such purpose:*' and then the three scoundrels burst out into such another horse-laugh that I could have killed them on the spot. In fact, I was more than half a mind to fall foul on them; but seeing that the game was all up with regard to Larry, and that whatever I might do would only put me deeper into his power, I pretended to put a good face on the matter and tried to laugh away my confusion. They didn't make any attempt to detain me; and so I wished them good night and got out of the house a precious deal quicker than I entered it. By Satan! I was never in such a precious rage in my life! I could have blown up the whole world with gunpowder if I had had a chance. I was actually boiling over with a passion that it hurt me to keep down. While hastening back here as quick as I could, a thousand strange thoughts entered my head. I fancied that I should find you all arrested, and that I was only suffered to go at large from Long Acre in order to be nabbed when returning either home to Fleet Lane, or else coming down here at the Folly Bridges. Then I thought that perhaps Larry only meant to make a joke of it after all. So what with some hesitation and a good deal of desperation, I resolved to come straight on here and learn what had taken place. But one thing was all the while uppermost in my mind—and this was, that Nell Gibson had betrayed us!"

"There's no doubt of it," exclaimed Beneull, savagely. "And now what's to be done?"

"What's to be done?" thundered the Hangman, starting from his seat and striking his fist with tremendous violence upon the table: "why, if we were all to hang for it to-morrow morning, Nell Gibson must die to-night!"—and as he glared round with his ferocious eyes upon his companions, he read assent in all their sinister countenances.

"That is to say," observed the Buttoner, "if we can find her: but my idea is that she's cut and run."

"Not she," exclaimed the Hangman. "You don't even know the girl so well as I do. She's not one to bolt like a coward: what she does, she'll stand by. Besides, didn't you tell me that Larry spoke of her just as if she hadn't peached at all?"

"Yes," observed the Buttoner: "but that was his gammon. No one could have told him about the fire at the Baronet's except Nell Gibson: and therefore she put him up to our present plot also."

"I know all that very well," exclaimed the Hangman: "but what I mean is simple enough. There's no doubt that Nell Gibson has peached against us; and it's also clear that Larry has promised not to tell that he had his information from her. This is the reason why he didn't have us all taken up: because Nell Gibson's testimony could alone bring home the fire to three of us, and this night's plot to us all. Well then, since it's clear that Larry Sampson has been bound over to secrecy by Nell, she herself will fancy that she can brave it out before us. She is a bold girl—and I'll lay my life that she's neither run away nor even thought of it, but that you will find her at Mother Young's."

"Well, I'll go and see," said the Buttoner. "But if so be she won't come down here, what am I to do?"

"Knock her on the head at once," rejoined the Hangman brutally: "and then cut and run at all risks."

"Wery good," said the Buttoner: and forcing his hat down upon his head with an air of determination, he issued from the dark crib.

CHAPTER XCII.

THE MURDER.

It was now one o'clock in the morning: but Mrs. Young's establishment was not one of those where very good hours were kept; and on arriving there, the Buttoner found Nell Gibson and three or four other young women sitting up and drinking brandy together.

The instant the man thus made his appearance, Nell Gibson threw upon him a look of significant inquiry, as much as to ask what had been done and whether the plot had succeeded; for, as the reader will bear in mind, she was in reality very far from being the authoress of the betrayal of that plot to Larry Sampson; and she was therefore totally ignorant of all that had taken place since she left the dark crib three hours previously.

But the Buttoner of course fancied that this look of inquiry was only a pretence on Nell's part in order to avert suspicion from herself, or else defy it with a brazen face: and therefore putting on a good-humoured look, as if he did not suspect her at all, he beckoned her to come out of the room. The young woman had not the slightest reason to refuse; on the contrary, she was most anxious to learn what had taken place; and supposing that her flash man now summoned her away to converse somewhere else without the danger of being overheard, she unhesitatingly rose from her seat, threw on her bonnet and cloak, and prepared to accompany him.

In the passage they encountered Mother Franklin, who had evidently been paying her respects to a bottle of strong waters: for she was now reeling about in a horrible state of ebriety. A tipsy woman is at all times a shocking spectacle: but this old hag of nearly ninety, with her bleared eyes now red as if they were raw, her toothless jaws wagging as if with a palsy, and her cracked voice giving utterance to mingled imprecations and obscenities, was altogether one of the most hideous objects that can possibly be conceived.

"That drunken old witch had a holiday this evening," said Nell Gibson, who, accustomed though she was to behold female depravity at all ages and in all its varied phases, was nevertheless ineffably disgusted at the appearance of Mother Franklin. "Yes, she has had a holiday; and you see she has made the best of it."

"Ah! would you insult me?" yelled forth Mother

Franklin, applying a vile epithet to the young woman. "But never mind! I dare say——"

"What is that you are muttering to yourself, you wretch?" exclaimed Nell Gibson, turning round towards the old woman with eyes flashing fire.

"You'll know, you'll know soon enough," responded the harridan, still muttering in a scarcely audible tone as she reeled towards the staircase to ascend to her own chamber.

Nell Gibson turned in deep disgust away, and followed the Buttoner from the house.

"Now, what has happened?" she inquired the moment they were in the street together.

"I musn't tell yer till we get down to the dark crib," said the Buttoner: "and then you'll know all."

The tone in which he spoke was low, deep, and ominous; and therefore Nell Gibson naturally inferred that the deed had been done and that Larry Sampson was murdered. No misgiving as to anything else entered her mind; and not for a moment could she conceive that the plot had failed and that the most terrible suspicions existed against herself. That the Buttoner would not tell her more nor enter into the slightest particulars in the street, seemed but a proper precaution; and the only circumstance that struck her as being at all singular, was that she should be fetched down to the dark crib at that hour.

"What am I wanted for at Bencull's?" she therefore asked, as she and the Buttoner proceeded rapidly towards Jacob's Island.

"Don't ask me a single question now," he replied, in a hurried and even tremulous voice: for vile and criminal as he was, he could not contemplate with utter indifference the murder of that fine young woman who was now leaning on his arm.

They continued their way in silence; and in a few minutes reached the dark crib. Bencull opened the street-door; and the moment Nell Gibson entered the back room, she perceived by the looks of the Hangman, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker that something was ominously amiss. Turning towards the Buttoner for an explanation, she saw that the expression of his countenance was dogged and sombre as if marked with the iron impress of some stern resolve: and then as her glance, now keen with augmenting terror, travelled to the features of Bencull as he came in last and closed the room-door behind him, she read her doom as it were in the looks of that dreadful man.

But not choosing to anticipate any evil—and indeed utterly unable to conjecture whence it could spring so as to assume an aspect at all menacing towards herself—she said in that tone of inquiry which an accomplice adopts when demanding an explanation as a right, "Now will you tell me what has been the result of this night's enterprise?"

"'Tis for you to tell us what Larry Sampson gave you for betraying the plot!" exclaimed the Hangman in a voice of thunder, as he turned his ferocious looks full upon the now really dismayed and startled young woman.

"Yes—how much did you get?" demanded Bencull, with equal ferocity of voice and look.

"Whatever may have happened, I did not betray you—I swear that I did not!" said Nell Gibson, now recovering somewhat of her presence of mind, while indignation deepened the colour upon her cheeks to the ruddiest glow.

"I knew she would deny it," said the Hangman, his eyes literally glowering upon her. "Why, you she-devil! Larry Sampson has not only baulked us and had the laugh at us, but he also knew that me, Bencull, and the Buttoner was the chaps that did the business t'other night at the Baronet's——"

"Yes—and he knowed all about Coffin's intending to go and get the great book," added Bencull, with such a concentrated ferocity that his voice sounded like the subdued roar of a wild beast.

"I am innocent of all this!" said Nell Gibson, her presence of mind rapidly failing.

"You lie!" thundered the Hangman. "We are certain that you have betrayed us: who else could have done it? Besides, we know more of your nasty sneaking tricks than you fancy——"

"Yes, look here," suddenly cried the Buttoner, producing Nell Gibson's own letter to Sir Douglas Huntingdon—that letter which she had penned at Meg Blowen's, and which her paramour had subsequently obtained from the boy to whom she had entrusted it for delivery.

"Ah!" she ejaculated, becoming pale as death—for she saw that her doom was inevitable: and now, though she tried to speak, the words stuck in her throat, and terror subdued all further power of utterance.

"You see she's guilty—there's no doubt of it!" said the Hangman: and suddenly flinging off his coat, he actually tucked up his shirt-sleeves in order more effectually to do the work of death.

At the same instant Bencull threw a silk handkerchief round Nell Gibson's neck; and placing his hand forcibly over her mouth, he prevented her from screaming. The other ruffians, not even excepting the Buttoner, now flew upon her like so many wild beasts upon their prey; and while some held her hands and feet, the others tugged hard at the handkerchief in order to strangle her. She struggled desperately, though in the iron grasp of those strong men: her cloak and bonnet were torn off—and her hair streamed down in wild disorder. Hard, hard did she fight against death: fearful was the convulsive tenacity with which the unfortunate girl clung to life! But gradually those strong spasmodic struggles grew weaker and weaker; and in a few more instants all was over!

The villains might have despatched her more speedily by the pistol, the knife, or the bludgeon: but they were afraid of exciting the attention of the neighbours by the report of fire-arms—and they were equally careful of spilling blood, which would leave its traces upon the floor—inasmuch as the attention of Mr. Lawrence Sampson had now evidently become fixed upon the dark crib.

But the work of murder was effectually done by means of strangulation: and when the appalling deed was accomplished the Buttoner suddenly burst into tears and cried like a child.

"What the devil is the meaning of this blubbering?" demanded the Hangman, with a terrible imprecation.

"It's nothink—on'y a sort of nervous fit that I can't help for the moment," whimpered the Buttoner. "There—take her away—take her away—don't let her stare up at me with those eyes that are fixed and dull as if made of glass!—take her away, I say!"—and the strong man shuddered from head to foot with hysterical convulsions.

"You two look to him," growled the Hangman, addressing the command to the Mushroom Faker and Bob the Durrynacker. "Come along, Bencull—you and me must do the rest of the work betwixt us."

"To be sure," responded Bencull, raising the corpse by the legs while Daniel Coffin lifted it by the shoulders. "Now then—come quick—out of this here door—there—that's right!"

And the two men emerged into the little gallery behind the house, bearing the dead body between them in the manner just described.

"Now let's lower it down gently, Ben," said the Hangman, "so as not to make a splash. There's nobody about to see what's going on!"

Nobody to see! Ah—the insensate wretch!—the eye of God was upon him—fixed on that scene of murder: and yet, because there was no candle at any neighbouring window, and because not a human soul was visible either on the opposite side of the ditch or on the bridges, the ruthless murderers fancied that no eye was upon them as they lowered the corpse into the stagnant dyke!

The light of the silver crescent moon shone upon this last act in the terrible drama: and as Bencull and the Hangman thus let down their victim into the slimy grave, there was a moment, as she hung over the wooden parapet ere they let go the handkerchief that they held in their grasp,—a moment, we say, at which the pure lustre of the planet of the night fell powerfully upon the countenance of the unfortunate young woman, showing in their distorted ghastliness those features that were so recently full of animation and even beauty! For a moment also did that moonlight delineate the form that was so finely modelled, but which now hung in the dread abandonment of death!

Terrible indeed was every detail of the tremendous

tragedy of this awful night: but in another moment all was over. The corpse was lowered down into its black sepulchre of slime—and the dark muddy waters closed with but a sluggish ripple above it.

CHAPTER XCIII.

THE TOKENS.

We must once more transport our readers to Paris—that peerless city which not only sets the fashions for the fair sex, but also affords the example of revolutionary glory to all the nations that are down-trampled and enslaved.

Three weeks had elapsed since that memorable night on which Julia Owen, under the name of *Laura Linden*, had brought all the artillery of her wiles and intrigues, her witcheries and her blandishments, to bear upon Jocelyn Loftus in the prison-department of the Prefecture of Police.

The reader will recollect that it was an accident which revealed to Jocelyn the identity of the false Laura Linden with the depraved though lovely Julia Owen; and that this sudden discovery was followed by earnest remonstrances on the part of the young gentleman and impassioned entreaties on that of the young lady. Indeed, in the enthusiasm to which she worked herself up and with which her maddening desires helped to animate her, Julia had threatened to commit suicide unless Jocelyn would consent to crown her hopes and minister to her sensual cravings. Then was it that in a tone of mingled remonstrance and despair, he exclaimed, "Oh! you will drive me mad—you will drive me mad!"—to which the infatuated Julia responded with all the fervour of devouring passion, "O Jocelyn, dear Jocelyn—thou knowest that I love thee!" That same instant Louisa Stanley was alike a listener and a spectatress; and the scream which thrilled from her lips penetrated through Jocelyn's brain. By the aid of the lamp he looked through the aperture in the partition-wall; and on recognizing his Louisa, a cry of rage and madness burst from him. All in a moment did he understand what must have been the impression produced upon the mind of his well-beloved; and while levelling the bitterest reproaches against Julia Owen, he fell down insensible.

All these particulars have we thus rapidly recapitulated in order to refresh the memory of the reader. We may now add that when Jocelyn returned to consciousness, he found a physician and a nurse seated by his bedside; and on inquiry he learnt that *for ten days* he had been ill with a delirious fever.

Ten days! and how much might have happened in that time! His Louisa had doubtless renounced him for ever; and thus were his fondest, dearest, brightest hopes destroyed beyond redemption! No—not beyond redemption: for he could explain to Louisa all that had occurred—he could show her how he had been made a victim instead of wilfully becoming a criminal. Yes: but by what means was he to communicate with her?—for he was still a prisoner—still subjected to all the rigours of that seclusion to which he had been consigned from the first moment of his arrest.

He appealed to the physician for leave to send to the post a letter which he wished to write: but the medical man, too independent if not too honest to deceive him with false representations, at once declared that he had no authority in the matter. Jocelyn then sent to demand an interview with the Prefect; and this functionary at once acceded to the young gentleman's request and repaired to his chamber. The physician and nurse withdrew; and when Loftus was alone with the Prefect, he demanded an explanation of what had occurred—how Julia Owen had been his neighbour, and how Miss Louisa Stanley had been brought to the Prefecture? To these queries the Prefect however declined giving an answer; and Jocelyn therefore remained in torturing suspense as to the circumstances which had arisen or the influences that had been exercised in order to place Louisa in a position to form the most erroneous and the most fatal opinion of his fidelity and honour. Finding that the Prefect would not give him any explanations on those heads, Jocelyn asked whether he might be permitted to communicate with his friends. The reply was exactly that which he had anticipated—namely, a negative, decisive enough though couched in the most courteous terms. He next demanded how long he was to be retained a prisoner; and thereupon the Prefect addressed him in the following manner:—

"In expectation of your convalescence, and naturally supposing that you would wish to put a term to your imprisonment, those who at present rule your destinies have prepared this bond, which you must sign; and I am instructed—upon receiving your signature, after you shall have duly perused and considered it—to grant you your freedom."

"My freedom!" ejaculated Loftus. "And immediately too?" he asked, raising himself up in his couch and looking eagerly at the Prefect.

"Yes—this very day if you choose," replied the functionary. "It is now two o'clock in the afternoon," he added consulting his watch; "and there is not the slightest reason wherefore you should not be comfortably installed at one of our gay Parisian hotels ere sunset."

"Oh! but I am so weak—so feeble—so ill," murmured Loftus, sinking back upon the pillow.

"Change of air and a sense of freedom will speedily restore you to health," said the Prefect.

"Give me the bond," cried Loftus, stretching out his hand: "let me see what it contains! And yet," he observed, abruptly checking the eagerness of his manner, while a dark cloud fell as suddenly upon his features; "it is useless—I know beforehand it is useless! That bond doubtless stipulates conditions which I cannot in honour fulfil——"

"Then will you remain a captive all your life?" asked the Prefect, significantly.

"Heavens! can such an atrocity be contemplated towards me?" exclaimed Jocelyn, in mingled astonishment and terror.

"You must understand," said the Prefect, "that inasmuch as the individuals whom your conduct has converted into enemies, are possessed of power illimitable, so will their persecution of you be pitiless if you persist in thwarting or interfering with their designs. Believe me, young man, it is a somewhat dangerous thing to obey the impulses of a maudlin chivalry, a sickly sentimentalism, or a false honour——"

"Silence, sir!" exclaimed Loftus, with a mingled dignity and sternness, as the excitement of his soul animated him with the strength to raise himself up once more to a sitting posture in the couch: "you are calumniating all the finest feelings that belong to our nature. Because I have vowed to frustrate the schemes which are in progress to accomplish the ruin of a persecuted and injured Princess—for that *this* is the cause of my imprisonment I can of course full well conceive——"

"Let us not bandy words," interrupted the Prefect. "The means of liberty are within your reach; and at all events there will be no harm in your perusing the bond," he added, drawing a parchment from his pocket.

Loftus took the deed—opened it—and endeavoured to read its contents. But only a few hours had elapsed since he had awakened to consciousness from the protracted delirium of fever; and a mist was still upon his eyes—so that he could not concentrate the powers of vision upon minute points. Dropping the document from his hand and sinking back upon the pillow, he said in a bitter tone, "I cannot read it: and even if I could, I am persuaded it would be useless."

"Nevertheless, permit me," exclaimed the Prefect, "to describe the leading points in the bond:" —then perceiving that Jocelyn offered no objection, he continued to say, "The first stipulation is to the effect that you solemnly and sacredly pledge yourself to bury in oblivion all the information you may ever have received relative to the mission of the Misses Owen and their appointment to situations about the person of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. Secondly, you renounce all idea of forming so unequal a match as that which you have contemplated in respect to Miss Louisa Stanley. Thirdly, you resume before the world your proper name, and make due submission to——"

"Enough, enough!" cried Jocelyn Loftus, the flush of indignation appearing upon his countenance, a moment before so pale. "Were your infamous Bastile still in existence, I would sooner be consigned to eternal immurement in one of its living tombs, than assent to the terms contained in that document. And now I can full well understand from what quarter emanate these persecutions. But, O God!" he exclaimed, an expression of sudden agony passing over his countenance as a thought struck him; "grant that poor Louisa fall not into the meshes and toils——"

The remainder of the sentence was lost in a suffocating sob which burst from Jocelyn's lips; and for two or three minutes he was almost completely unmanned by the violence of his emotions. Weakened and enfeebled as he was by illness, it cannot be wondered if his mind were sympathetically attenuated. and that his feelings should for a space triumph over his habitual fortitude.

"No—it is not a Bastile which you have to dread," observed the Prefect after a pause: "but if you still continue obstinate——"

"You mean," interrupted Loftus, bitterly, "if I still continue to spurn proposals alike dishonourable and tyrannical to a degree——"

"Well, we will not dispute as to words," resumed the Prefect, rising from the seat which he had taken by the young gentleman's bedside: "but perhaps you will understand me when I state that if we have no Bastiles, yet we have madhouses;—and should you persevere in your present course——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Loftus, all his wonted fortitude now returning to his aid. "You may consign me to a lunatic asylum on pretences as base as those which have made me a prisoner at the Prefecture: but all the diabolical tyranny of the mad-doctor, and all the coercion of the strait-waistcoat, the barred chamber, the iron chains, and the ferocious keeper, will not prove more effective with me than the persuasion of his Excellency the Prefect of Police!"

And as Jocelyn Loftus gave utterance to these words, he surveyed the French functionary with a calm but noble dignity which was more impressive than an angry defiance would have been.

"Then you refuse your signature to this bond?" said the Prefect, moving towards the door.

"I do," was the firm reply. "And now, before you leave me, sir, let me remark that the day will come when you may perhaps repent of your conduct towards one who never injured you. Indeed, if there be a spark of generous feeling in your nature—if you have aught of that chivalry in your soul for which your nation is so justly famed—you must shrink from the unworthy position which you are occupying—namely, that of the despots' tool! No honourable man would consent to be the gaoler of an innocent person under such circumstances."

The Prefect of Police made no reply to this language of rebuke and remonstrance uttered with dignity rather than with passion: but waiting until Jocelyn had ceased, his Excellency merely bowed and then quitted the room, to which the physician and the nurse soon afterwards returned.

A week now passed away, thus making up the three weeks which at the commencement of this chapter we stated to have elapsed since the memorable night of Julia Owen's adventures. During those seven days which thus succeeded the interview with the Prefect, Jocelyn Loftus became pretty well restored to health. But his mind remained a prey to cruel misgivings and incessant anxieties.

That the Marquis of Leveson had interfered in his affairs, he had not the slightest doubt. In the first place, it was the Marquis who had been instrumental in nominating the Owens to their present mission; in the second place, he was interested for his own reputation's sake in preventing any exposure of the conspiracy thus in progress against the Princess of Wales; and thirdly, it was perfectly intelligible to Jocelyn wherefore the Marquis sought to prevent his union with an obscure and portionless girl such as Louisa Stanley. Arguing, therefore, from all these circumstances that Lord Leveson had been busily engaged against him, Jocelyn was fearful that the Marquis might by some means or other have gained the confidence of Louisa; and although the young lover had too sublime a faith in the purity and chastity of the damsel's soul to imagine for an instant that she would lend an ear to any overtures which the veteran debauchee might choose to make, yet knowing full well how unprincipled and unscrupulous was the character of that nobleman, Jocelyn could not help fearing for Louisa as

one may tremble for the lamb in the power of the wolf!

Thus did the week following the interview with the Prefect pass unhappily enough for Jocelyn Loftus: but still he was determined to endure any amount of persecution and undergo any extent of adversity, rather than submit to the terms dictated by his enemies.

At the end of the week the physician pronounced his patient to be so far recovered as not to require his services any longer. Jocelyn saw that it was of no use to endeavour to interest the medical man in his behalf: for though full of that courtesy which seems innate with every Frenchman, he was nevertheless evidently a mere tool of the Prefect. Loftus therefore contented himself with thanking the physician for his attentions; and the medical man then took his leave.

But the nurse still remained. She was a Frenchwoman of about sixty—taciturn, and reserved, but keen and shrewd, and with that kind of sharp angular countenance which denotes extreme artfulness and duplicity. Hitherto she had never addressed a word to Loftus save in fulfilment of her ministering duties as a nurse; but the moment the physician had taken his departure she suddenly assumed a look of deep significancy, as if encouraging Jocelyn to question her.

"And are your services likewise to cease?" he asked, addressing her of course in the French tongue.

"That depends upon you, sir," she immediately answered: "and if you are wise you will send a note to the Prefect desiring that I may be allowed to remain in attendance upon you a few days more. Should he hesitate, you must pretend to suffer a relapse, so that it may become a matter of apparent necessity for me to stay. His Excellency has the utmost faith in me: I have been attached to the establishment for the last twenty years; and he does not think me capable of abusing his confidence."

Jocelyn had listened in mingled amazement and hope to this speech, which the old nurse delivered in a cautious whisper: but after the conduct of the charwoman in becoming the agent of Julia Owen's manœuvres, and considering also those manœuvres themselves, Loftus was resolved not to be hasty in putting faith in anybody belonging to the Prefecture.

"What am I to understand from all that you have just told me?" he inquired, looking her full in the face.

"That I am anxious and able to serve you," she immediately answered, "if you choose to be served by me."

"But to what end?" asked Jocelyn, "and in what manner?"

"I suppose an escape is the end aimed at," she returned: "but as to the plan to be adopted, I know naught of it."

"Tell me what you meant by the way in which you addressed me just now," said Jocelyn, resolved to hear more ere he committed himself in any manner. "For during the past week—indeed, since the delirium left me—you have been for hours and hours alone with me in this room, during the intervals between the doctor's visits; and not once have you spoken a single cheering word, nor thrown aside your chill reserve—far less have you given any indication of anxiety or willingness to obtain my confidence."

"Because," rejoined the nurse, "nothing transpired in your favour outside these walls until to-day."

"And what has happened at length, then?" asked Jocelyn, every nerve and fibre thrilling with uncertainty and suspense.

"When I went out an hour ago, to procure some jelly for you at the pastry-cook's," said the old nurse, "I was accosted by a gent'leman who asked me if I belonged to the Prefecture, as he saw me issue forth from the building with a small market-basket hanging to my arm. I answered in the affirmative; and pulling a handful of gold out of his pocket as a sign that he was able and willing to recompense, he besought me to give him a few minutes' private conversation. I told him to follow me to the pastry-cook's; and on arriving there, we went into an inner room, where we sate down to discourse. The gentleman—who, by the by, I should have said is an Englishman, although he speaks French as well as you do, sir—put twenty pieces of gold into my hand and asked me if I would accept the sum as an earnest of what he was disposed to give if I could and would serve him. To convince you, sir, that I am telling the truth," added the nurse, "here are the twenty pieces that he gave me—all in *guineas*, as I think you call them in your language:"—and she displayed the coin as she spoke.

"Well, I certainly see that you have twenty good golden guineas," said Jocelyn, his heart beating high with hope notwithstanding his endeavour to put a bridle upon his credulity. "Pray proceed."

"The English gentleman, after a great many questions," continued the nurse, "evidently for the purpose of testing my good faith, came to the point at length by asking me whether I knew any prisoner of your name——"

"What name?" asked our hero.

"*Jocelyn Loftus*," returned the old nurse: "for although I know, sir, that it is not your right name, yet I am not aware what your right one really is. The Englishman however of whom I am speaking, mentioned you by the name which you bear here; and in reply to his question I told him not only that I knew you, but that I was actually appointed by the Prefect to wait upon you. At these tidings he was perfectly overjoyed; but with a reasonable regard for caution, he would say nothing more unless I took him back from you some token to prove that you believed me to be trustworthy. And that you may be enabled to do this if you choose, I have brought a token from the Englishman."

"Give it to me," exclaimed Loftus, now utterly unable to subdue or conceal his eagerness; and clutching at a scrap of paper which the old woman handed him, he hastily read the following lines:—

"Clara Stanley has seen her sister Louisa, who is safe. This is a token that you have friends outside. Send a token to prove that the bearer may be trusted."

A fervid joy now flamed up in Jocelyn's eyes and glowed upon his countenance: for a thousand thrilling and ecstatic ideas swept through his brain. Louisa was safe—and Clara had seen her since the adventure in Paris. But were the sisters now interesting themselves by means of some trusty agent

to effect his liberation? and if so, was it not a proof that his well-beloved still cherished his image—was still devoted to him? And if she still clung to his memory and still considered herself his betrothed, was it not an evidence that she no longer believed him unfaithful? and did it not appear as if the wheel of fortune had begun to turn in his favour?

Such was the first gush of delicious thoughts that were excited by that scrap of paper: but now came the more serious reflection—was he to put faith in this seeming token? or was it the first step in some new intrigue to destroy him?

"Describe to me the person of this Englishman whom you have met," he said, once more resuming a tone of caution and a look of reserve.

"Rather stout—of middle height—and about forty," returned the nurse: "great black whiskers and mustachios—red face and fierce-looking—dressed in a military style—and carries a great stick with a large knob."

"I have not the slightest idea who he is," observed Loftus, thinking that the description was much more suitable to a Frenchman than to an Englishman: and again he hesitated as to the amount of reliance he ought to place upon the old woman's tale.

But still he saw not how the token sent to him could possibly form a link in any chain of contemplated treachery; and much less could he understand how he should be compromising himself by sending some sign in reply. Besides, where nothing was risked, nothing would be gained: and if he indeed had friends outside, it was his duty to acknowledge their good intentions and do all he could to further them. Therefore, without any more hesitation, he at once wrote on the back of the slip of paper the following words:—

"Has Miss Louisa returned to Canterbury? or is she with her sister in Stratton-street, London?"

"When are you to meet the Englishman again?" he asked, as he handed the scrap of paper back to the old nurse.

"This evening at seven o'clock," was the response. "But in the meantime, do you write to the Prefect and solicit that I shall remain in attendance upon you."

Loftus hastened to comply with this suggestion; and in the course of an hour he received a written answer from the Prefect, couched in the following terms:—

"*Cabinet of the Prefecture of Police.*
"November 24th, 1814.

"SIR,—I beg to inform you that I have received your note, and in reply thereto have to state that the attentions of the nurse shall be continued towards you so long as you remain a prisoner in the Prefecture But the medical attendant has this day reported your complete recovery; and I have therefore to inform you that according to the instructions which I have received, you must prepare for removal to another place in the course of two or three days, unless you assent to those terms which may at once empower me to restore you to liberty.

"I have the honour to salute you,
"THE PREFECT OF POLICE."

Jocelyn read this note to the old nurse, watching her countenance as he did so: but he could not discover in her looks anything to make him suspect that she was playing him false or was privy to any new plot initiated against him. He now therefore anxiously awaited the result of her next interview with the Englishman; and as seven o'clock approached, his excitement rose to the highest degree. At length she took her departure; and after an absence of more than an hour she made her appearance again in the prison-chamber.

"I have seen the Englishman," she said; "and I gave him back the scrap of paper on which you had written something, which evidently satisfied him that I was trustworthy. He thereupon took me in a hackney-coach to a house in the Rue du Bac; and in a handsome apartment on the first floor I was introduced to an elderly gentleman with a great brown wig, red whiskers, and a very good set of teeth. He is also an Englishman. A few words passed between him and the gentleman who had brought me hither: but as they spoke in English I did not understand what they said. I however perceived that the one with the black whiskers and mustachios was called *Captain*."

"I cannot think who they can be," said Jocelyn. "But pray go on."

"The gentleman with the brown wig and red whiskers desired me to sit down: and he then proceeded to put all kinds of questions concerning the Prefecture—its internal arrangements, the distribution of the buildings, the manner in which they are guarded, and the exact position of your chamber. To all these queries," continued the nurse, "I gave the fullest and most faithful particulars. Indeed, being well aware for what motive I was thus interrogated, I told the two gentlemen that it would be madness to dream of effecting your escape either by force or stratagem, so long as the Prefecture remained your prison. Struck by this last observation of mine, they asked what I meant; and I proceeded to explain that this very afternoon you had received a letter from the Prefect intimating that you were shortly to be removed elsewhere. This statement seemed to give a new impulse to the thoughts of your English friends; and after conversing together for a short time in their own language, the Captain penned a few hasty lines which he bade me give you."

With these words the old woman handed Loftus a note, the contents of which he eagerly perused, and which ran as follow:—

"The few words you sent just now have been regarded as a token that the bearer is fully trustworthy. Being unacquainted with your handwriting, it was necessary to receive from you some proof that the little billet was really delivered to *you yourself*, instead of being placed in the hands of your gaolers. The words you wrote back, could not well have been forged by any official of the Prefecture, inasmuch as they involve questions which none but you would have been likely to put; and therefore we received them as a token that the first little missive really reached you. It now appears that you are soon to be removed. You must ascertain, if possible, when this removal will take place, and whither you are going. But if you cannot glean these particulars, you need not despair: we shall maintain a constant watch—as we are pledged to accomplish our aim!

"Miss Louisa Stanley has returned to her residence at Canterbury, having escaped from many perils. We are enabled to assure you that nothing which your enemies have devised or done, has in any way impaired her full confidence in you.

"YOUR FRIENDS OUTSIDE."

The joy—the supreme, ineffable joy—which Loftus experienced on perusing the latter part of

the letter, so transcended all the previous satisfaction which he felt at the prospects of escape held out by the preceding portion, that he for a few minutes forgot everything save the one grand fact that his Louisa loved him as fondly as ever. The assurance thus conveyed seemed to inspire him with new life: hope lit up its flaming beacon before his eyes—and again did he whisper to himself that the wheel of fortune was turning in his favour.

But when the first gush of ecstatic feelings had thus found a vent, he was enabled to revert with befitting seriousness and deliberation to the measures that were in progress for his escape. To solicit another interview with the Prefect was the only way to obtain the information which his friends outside requested him to procure—namely, the time fixed for his removal, and the place to which he was to be removed: but as it was now nine o'clock in the evening he considered it best to postpone the demand for that interview with the Prefect until the following morning. Dismissing the nurse therefore for the night, he remained alone to meditate upon his prospects, his hopes, and his love.

After breakfast next morning he was about to pen a note to the Prefect, when the door opened and that functionary entered the room. The old nurse immediately withdrew; and the moment she had retired, the Prefect addressed himself to Jocelyn in the following manner:—

"By this morning's post I have received a letter from London. It is to the effect that from something which has transpired within the last week or ten days, it is deemed expedient no longer to insist upon that clause in the bond which forbids your alliance with Miss Louisa Stanley."

"Ah!" ejaculated Loftus, in astonishment; "what could have transpired to have produced this change of opinion upon that point? Your Excellency can surely speak with more openness and less enigma than heretofore. Indeed, I know full well that the Marquis of Leveson is at the bottom of all this——"

"Well, then," observed the Prefect, hastily, "it does appear from the letter I have received this morning, that his lordship *has* learnt something which has induced him to alter his mind very materially concerning this matrimonial project of your's. But whether it be that Miss Louisa Stanley turns out to be more highly connected than he had at first supposed—or whether she has suddenly proved the heiress to a fortune—I am of course utterly unable to conjecture. Suffice it for you to know, that this particular clause in the bond is withdrawn; and I will take it upon myself to erase the stipulation which requires your submission and obedience to the Marquis of Leveson. It now therefore only remains for you to sign your assent to that clause which sacredly and solemnly pledges you to abstain from any interference in the affairs of the Princess of Wales—to bury in oblivion all that you may have ever learnt upon that subject—and to pursue your future career as if no such details had ever come to your knowledge."

"I have listened to your Excellency with varied feelings of interest," said Jocelyn, in a firm and deliberate tone. "That an assent should now be given to my union with Miss Louisa Stanley, is so far agreeable inasmuch as it can only be a tribute of admiration and respect accorded to her beauty and her virtues: for that she has suddenly discovered any high connexions or become possessed of a fortune, I do not for a moment believe. The clause relative to my submission to the Marquis of Leveson could indeed be well dispensed with, for reasons which I need not explain. But as for that clause which *is* to remain and which I am to be called upon to sign—were I to purchase my freedom on such terms, never should I dare venture into the presence of Louisa Stanley again. When first I set out upon this enterprise, she encouraged me to pursue it; and with all the generosity of her nature did she appreciate the duty which circumstances thus imposed upon me. She felt for the injured Princess—not because she *is* a Princess—but because she is a woman—a wronged and injured woman!—and she would regard me as a coward—a base recreant—were I now, in a moment of weakness or folly, to abandon the cause of that persecuted lady."

The Prefect exerted all his eloquence to remonstrate, persuade, and cajole, in order to induce Jocelyn to sign the bond, now cut down to a single clause: but not even to this one clause would the young man append his name. At length, tired of his unavailing endeavours to alter the prisoner's decision, the Prefect said, "Then if you are bent upon this obstinacy, I have no alternative but to follow out the instructions which I have received."

"And those instructions?" said Loftus, interrogatively.

"To treat you as a lunatic," responded the Prefect, "and remove you to an asylum for the insane. To-morrow night, therefore, at eleven o'clock, will you be transferred hence—unless in the interval you yield to the dictates of reason and prudence."

Having thus spoken, his Excellency hastened from the room; and soon afterwards the old nurse returned. Jocelyn now penned the following note:—

"To my friends outside,—Whoever ye are, accept my sincerest and most heartfelt thanks! Your note duly reached me; and as a farther token that it is really I, the undersigned, who am thus corresponding with you, permit me to ask whether Miss Clara Stanley is still residing with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford in Stratton Street, Piccadilly? The time of my removal is fixed for to-morrow night at eleven; and my destiny is *a mad-house*—but where situated I know not. This point I could not ascertain; nor is there any chance of discovering it. I have not the slightest doubt that the old woman is fully trustworthy.

"JOCELYN LOFTUS."

But scarcely had our hero penned the last words of his note, when the thought suddenly struck him, with the dismaying effect of a lightning-flash, that although the nurse brought the notes to him and carried his own to the friends outside, yet that it was quite possible for her to submit the whole correspondence to the Prefect as it passed through her hands. This idea had not struck him before; and his heart now sank within him. He glanced up from the paper on which he had just been writing, and encountered the looks of the woman as they were fixed upon him: but there was nothing troubled in the manner in which she met his gaze. On the contrary, she evidently perceived that some misgiving had suddenly entered his mind; and in a calm unruffled tone, she said, "I cannot convince you, sir, of my fidelity: but after all, what risk do you run by trusting me? If I really am faithful, well and good: but if, on the other hand, I am all the while betraying you to the Prefect, what alteration can it

make in the circumstances of your position? You are not like a murderer or a felon, on whom heavy irons are put when he attempts to escape."

The truth of these observations forcibly struck Jocelyn Loftus; and even if he were not thoroughly convinced of the old woman's fidelity, he at all events resolved to allow the matter to take its course. But to the note which he had just penned, he added the words—"*Nevertheless, use the utmost caution.*"

The old nurse presently sallied forth with this letter; and in about an hour she returned, bearing a written reply which ran as follows:—

"Your note is received; and in pursuance of your recommendation *to use caution*, we shall not commit any of our plans to paper. Suffice it to say that we are neither inactive nor irresolute. Miss Clara Stanley was residing in Stratton Street when we left London a few days ago.

"YOUR FRIENDS OUTSIDE."

"P.S.—Unless anything of importance should transpire—such, for instance, as the postponement of your removal—it will not be necessary for any farther communication to take place between us. We have given the old woman a hundred guineas."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform our readers that the remainder of this day and the whole of the next passed amidst much anxiety and torturing suspense. At one moment Jocelyn was buoyed up with exulting hope, feeling confident in the success of the plans, whatever they were, which his friends outside were conducting: at another moment his spirits drooped, as a bird plunges down from the loftiest clouds into the lowest abysses of some yawning gulf—and he fancied that he was betrayed! As the hour approached for his removal from the Prefecture, the restlessness of his spirit amounted to a positive excruciation; and he felt the blood coursing at a fever-pace in its crimson channels.

CHAPTER XCIV.

THE JOURNEY

At ten o'clock on the night fixed for Jocelyn's departure, the Prefect visited him, and made a last effort to induce him to sign the bond.

"You see," observed his Excellency, "what a high opinion even your very enemies have of your honour and integrity, since they are willing to permit you to go at large in the world, the possessor of all their most important secrets, with no other guarantee than your simple written pledge that you will not reveal them."

"Yes," said Jocelyn, bitterly;—"they first attempted to destroy every sentiment of virtue and paralyse every impulse of honour within my breast—for that this was the aim in subjecting me to the seductive wiles of the temptress Julia Owen, I cannot doubt. But having had so signal a proof that I prefer the approval of my conscience to all the blandishments of transient pleasure, and that I cherish honour as if it were a worship,—my enemies, as you justly style them, are now willing to trust themselves to that integrity and that sense of rectitude which they have vainly endeavoured to subvert. They know that my pledge would be my bond, and that my written promise would never be falsified. But that pledge and that promise they will not obtain from me!"

These words were uttered in so firm a tone that the Prefect of Police offered no farther remonstrance and attempted no more persuasion; but coldly bowing to our young hero, he quitted the room. A few minutes afterwards the old nurse entered to take leave of Jocelyn; and she spoke her farewells with an air of so much sincerity that all remaining suspicions with regard to her were banished from his mind.

A little before eleven Jocelyn was fetched from his room by a couple of gendarmes and conducted down to the court-yard, where a post-chaise and four appeared in readiness. The postilions were ready mounted—the lamps of the vehicle were lighted—and the moment Loftus entered, the door was banged and the equipage rolled at a rapid rate through the gloomy gate of the Prefecture.

Inside the chaise Jocelyn found himself in the companionship of two individuals. One of them he speedily recognised, by the light which the street-lamps shed into the carriage, as the very same police-agent who had arrested him nearly two months back at the Hotel Meurice: the other was unknown to Jocelyn, but was no doubt likewise an official of the Prefecture. Both were in plain clothes; and the first-mentioned one immediately addressed our hero in terms of politeness, to which a somewhat cold though sufficiently courteous response was given: but it was not to be supposed that Jocelyn could feel very well inclined to converse familiarly with any of the agents of that tyranny to which he was being subjected.

On emerging from the Prefecture, the post-chaise rattled along the quays bordering the Seine; and turning into the central avenue of the Champs Elysées, took the road for St. Germain. While in the Champs Elysées, and indeed within the immediate precincts of the suburbs, there were so many vehicles hurrying in every direction that it was impossible to say whether any particular one was following the post-chaise: but when proceeding farther along the road and the open country was gained, Jocelyn listened anxiously for the sounds of any vehicle in pursuit. For if his English friends were not thus following, how was it possible that they could accomplish his rescue? Such was the question which he asked himself a dozen times during the first half-hour that elapsed after leaving the Parisian suburbs behind: but no sounds of any vehicle in pursuit reached his ears.

The weather was fine, clear and frosty: the moon sat enthroned in silver splendour amidst the deep blue of the cloudless over-arching sky, which was gemmed with myriads of stars, those chaste handmaids of the Queen of Night! The police-agents, finding that Jocelyn did not encourage them in conversation, soon sank into silence: but through the semi-obscurity which prevailed inside the vehicle, our hero could observe their eyes fixed upon him with the keenness of custodians whom no soothing influence could lull into slumber so long as a watch must be kept.

The journey had now lasted upwards of an hour, when suddenly a man on horseback, coming from behind—that is to say, from the direction of Paris—shot past the post-chaise with incredible speed.

"His horse has run away with him," observed one of the police-agents: and as he put down the window and looked forth, the movement of his body made his coat open somewhat, and Jocelyn observed

that he had a pair of pistols secured about his person.

In about a couple of minutes after the horseman had galloped by with the meteor-like rapidity just described, another one, equally well mounted and proceeding at the same desperate rate, swept past the chaise—no sooner appearing than he was instantaneously out of sight.

"Hah! I should think they must be government expresses," observed the police-agent who was looking out at the window: "and yet they did not appear to have on the official uniform."

"It was impossible to tell at the rate they swept past," said the other police-agent. "They must be Government couriers—or else the American Ambassador's expresses bound for Havre."

But scarcely were these words spoken, when a vehicle, built like the tall English phaeton then in vogue—drawn by two splendid horses—and containing three persons, also swept by the chaise in the same direction as the two horsemen, who from their fleetness might be taken for the outriders of that dashing equipage.

"Ah! at what a tremendous rate that vehicle is going," cried the police-agent who still had his head at the window. "I wonder what it can mean? Doubtless some of your mad-cap fellow-countrymen, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Loftus: "for you Englishmen are desperate riders and drivers, and can make your horses do anything."

"Those travellers, whoever they may be, are indeed going very quick," said our hero, assuming a tone of the most perfect indifference, although a powerful excitement was really agitating in his breast—for a secret voice seemed to whisper that those dashing horsemen and the occupants of the phaeton were the friends whose presence he had been so eagerly expecting upon the road.

Scarcely had he come to this conviction when the chaise entered the town of St. Germain; and there the horses were changed. The halt only occupied two or three minutes; and the vehicle proceeded on at a rapid rate. Half-an hour elapsed—St. Germain was far behind—and the road now lay through a wood stretching far as the eye could reach on either side till lost in the gloom of distance. The moon still shone in unclouded splendour, shadowing forth the sombre appearance of the landscape; for not a human habitation was now to be seen. A presentiment sprang up in Jocelyn's mind that ere the wood was cleared something would be attempted by his friends; and as he leant back in the seat, the two officers sitting opposite to him, he endeavoured through the obscurity to discover with straining looks, the exact position in which the principal police-agent's pistols were secured at his waist—for our young hero was resolved, if any attack were made, to second as resolutely as he could *inside* the endeavours of his friends *outside*.

Rapidly along the level road—which ran straight as an arrow through the wood—proceeded the equipage. By the shadow which it threw upon the ground, in the powerful moonlight, Jocelyn could perceive that there were no guards or gendarmes seated outside the chaise: the two agents who occupied the interior along with him, were therefore the only persons to contend against—for the postilions were sure not to be armed. Perceiving, therefore, that he was so slightly guarded, he felt assured that the old nurse had not betrayed to the Prefect the proceedings of his friends, and that therefore such an eventuality as an attempt at rescue had never been dreamt of by the authorities.

Scarcely had Jocelyn revolved all these calculations in his own mind, when from the two branches of a cross-road a sudden attack was made upon the equipage. From the right hand and the left, simultaneously and with matchless energy, was the onslaught made by five determined persons. The postilions were instantaneously knocked from their horses: a foot was then placed on either breast and a pistol pointed at either head, accompanied with stern injunctions to remain quiet, "or their brains would be blown out." One of the postilions was completely stunned by the fall, and with regard to him therefore the warning was unnecessary: but the other was less hurt, and in piteous tones he promised to remain quiet, imploring that his life would be spared.

At the same moment that the postilions were hurled to the ground by two of the assailants, the traces were cut by a third, and the horses at once stood still. Simultaneously also were both the doors of the chaise hastily torn open; and at each door appeared an individual thrusting pistols into the interior.

The sudden movement which the two police-agents made to tear open their coats and draw forth the weapons with which they were armed, was instantaneously frustrated by Jocelyn, who threw himself with all his force upon them, and thus succeeded in encumbering and restraining their actions for a few moments, while the two individuals who appeared at the doors, aided him in completely overpowering them. To drag them forth into the road—bind them with stout cords—take their weapons from them and toss them to a distance,—all this was now the work of a minute; and no sooner was it over when Jocelyn's friends hurried him along with them up one of the branches of the cross-road, where the two saddle-horses and the dashing phaeton appeared.

"Now away, with the speed of the whirlwind!" exclaimed one who seemed to be the leader of the party, and who by the hasty glance which Jocelyn threw upon him in the moonlight, seemed to answer to the old nurse's description of the elderly gentleman with the brown wig and the red whiskers. "Up into the phaeton," he cried, seizing Loftus by the arm and literally thrusting him on to the front seat. "Now, Captain, where are you?"

"Here, my lord," instantaneously responded a stentorian voice; and the individual who thus spoke, sprang at the same time upon the back of one of the saddle-horses: then in a still louder tone, he cried, "Robin?"

"Here, sir," was the reply: and the person who now spoke leapt up behind the phaeton, where another of the band also ensconsed himself.

All was haste and bustle, but no confusion. The Captain, be it remembered, had mounted one saddle-horse: the other was at the same time bestridden by its owner. The personage in the brown wig, and who had been addressed as "my lord," seized the reins of the phaeton and took his seat as driver—and then the whole cavalcade, consisting of saddle-horses and equipage, sped away at a tremendous rate.

CHAPTER XCV.

EDITHA.

It was on the fifth evening after the incidents just related; and if we peep into the Countess of Curzon's bourdoir between eight and nine o'clock, we shall observe her ladyship occupied with the elegant mysteries of the toilette. And yet the word *mysteries* scarcely applies in the present instance: for no need had Editha of cosmetics, sophistications, or adventitious appliances to enhance the natural splendour of her charms.

No succedaneous enamel was required for those pearly teeth that were without spot or blemish and which shone between the lips that were full and red as a luscious fruit of the tropics: no art could shed upon the cheeks the hue of a richer carnation than that which the warm blood itself gave in its mantling glow;—no dye nor factitious confection could crown the dark hair with a brighter glory than its own purply glossiness. And though the complexion of this lady was of oriental duskiness, yet would it have been a very folly and a shame to have endeavoured to mitigate its dark beauty by the appliance of aught whiter or make that skin fairer. For that soft and delicate tint of bronze—the softest and most delicate that can possibly be conceived—gave her the appearance of the warm Andalusian or glowing Italian,—as if she were one of the impassioned daughters of the sunny south!

Her eyes, so dark and yet so full of living lustre, seemed like ebony condensing all the brilliancy of diamonds: as suns they appeared to burn those who gazed upon them—and, as suns also, did they seem as if worlds of bliss and realms of paradise lay concealed in the depths of their glory!

She had chosen for her evening toilette a rich satin dress of a shining amber colour, and which

seemed to array her in the brightness of a robe made of golden tissue. The low body left her polished shoulders entirely bare, and revealed sufficient of the bust to show the sculptural contours of the round, fair, and well-detached bosoms. The naked arms had a graceful curve which admirably became their perfect modelling; and though the skirt of the shining robe was so ample, yet did its plaits and folds afford an external indication of the symmetry which it concealed. Thus the shape of the lower limbs might be conjectured—aye, followed and delineated by the mind's eye, especially when the imagination was assisted by the exquisite conformation of the foot and ankle that peeped from beneath the satin dress.

Pearls set off the purple glossiness of her luxuriant hair—and pearls also marked with their delicate tracery the roundness of her swan-like neck. Nothing could exceed the glowing appearance of the Countess of Curzon in that dark oriental loveliness which made her seem like a houri fresh from the sensualities and luxuriousness of Mahomet's paradise. All the brilliance of beauty, the grace of motion, and the seductiveness of look which ever combined to render woman alike charming and dangerous, now mingled all the magic of their spells wherewith to invest the Countess of Curzon.

In the brilliant toilette which Editha had just achieved, she was efficiently assisted by the faithful Gertrude, her principal lady's-maid. This young woman, who was herself exceedingly beautiful, was devotedly attached to her mistress—not merely because she was a confidant in Lady Curzon's intrigues, nor because she was well remunerated for her complicity, but because she really loved the Countess for her own sake, with a rare amount of disinterested affection.

"Your ladyship never appeared more beautiful than you are to-night," said Gertrude, as she threw a rich ermine cloak over the shoulders of her mistress.

"I am glad you tell me so, my dear girl," replied Editha, laughing gaily; "for I know that you are impartial. And now remember what I have told you——"

"Your ladyship knows," said Gertrude, with a meaning look, "that I always attend to your ladyship's commands."

"You do, my dear girl," observed the Countess, tapping her caressingly on the cheek, "and you are aware that there is nothing I will not do to serve you in return. Whenever you find a husband that will suit you," added Editha with a gay smile, "I shall take care of your dowry."

"Oh! there is time enough to think of *that*," exclaimed Gertrude. "I do not wish to quit your ladyship's service, even to be married——"

"But you must not lend a willing ear to the idle flatteries of men," said Editha. "Wait till you are married, Gertrude, and then you can do anything—gratifying every phantasy and yielding to every whim. But in the meantime, prudence should lead you to be what the world calls virtuous. At all events," she added, with a gay laugh and with a look singularly full of wickedness and arch significance, "do not yield to the honied words of my husband."

"Oh! was not that farce an amusing one?" cried Gertrude, bursting into a peel of the merriest laughter, while her own looks also expressed a roguish meaning. "It was better than any play at a theatre: such equivoques! But when will his lordship return home?"

"I do not know exactly," responded Editha. "In a few days, I presume. He told me that he was going to France on some sudden and pressing business. Whether it be true or not, I cannot say. But 'tis now nine o'clock, and I must be off to Lady Lechmere's."

The Countess thereupon issued forth from her boudoir, and descended the stairs with the splendid ermine cloak flowing loosely around her. When at the bottom of the staircase she looked up; and perceiving that Gertrude was leaning over the ballusters of the landing above, Editha gave the abigail a parting look of deep meaning, which was responded to by one of equally vivid intelligence. Lady Curzon then entered the carriage, and was driven to Lady Lechmere's abode in North Audley Street.

The brilliant saloons of this mansion were already crowded when Editha made her appearance: but amongst all the blaze of beauty and fashion there assembled, no female scion of the aristocracy was more remarkable for the loveliness of her person and the elegance of her attire, than Lady Curzon. Immediately on entering, she was surrounded by a host of admirers: and assuredly that was a moment of proud triumph for the charming patrician lady, to perceive that many rivals were deserted by their fickle gallants, who now hastened to pay their homage to herself.

Lady Lechmere was a widow on the shady side of forty: and notwithstanding the disparity of their years, Lady Curzon being only six-and-twenty, the closest friendship existed between them.

Amongst the brilliant company thus assembled at Lady Lechmere's, perhaps the only one of the male sex, who could not boast of being descended either from some Norman cut-throat Baron, or from some vile harlot of the reign of Charles II,—and who could not produce a genealogical tree containing a thousand names, or a coat of arms interwoven with the mosaic work of endless quarterings,—the only man, in fact, who had no *prestige* of high birth, lofty rank, and proud title to recommend him to the notice of the fashionable world, was Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker of Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street. It was true, that if he possessed an office in the dingy regions of the City, he likewise owned a splendid house at Clapham; and that if he had no aristocratic title to embellish his name, at all events he had the reputation of enjoying an immense fortune. Nevertheless, these circumstances would not have sufficed as an introduction into the exclusive circles of the West End, had not some other influence been exercised in order to throw open the gilded portals of fashion to admit him within the sphere of that roseate scene of luxury.

What, then, had proved the talisman to open these doors to the bill-broker of Nicholas Lane?—what was the mysterious *sesame* which had produced this magic effect? It was to the Countess of Curzon that Emmerson was indebted for the extraordinary privilege which he thus enjoyed. In plain terms, Editha had become his mistress!

Possessed of the forged bills, Emmerson had experienced but little trouble in coercing her; and when once she had abandoned herself to him in

order to regain possession of those documents, she found that he was prepared to behave towards her with the utmost munificence. Steeped in debt—extravagant to a degree—having a thousand wants and no means of gratifying them, inasmuch as her tradesmen refused further credit, and she could obtain but little money from her husband, Lady Curzon eagerly availed herself of the proposals made by her City friend; and in return for the gold with which he profusely supplied her, she rewarded him as liberally with her favours. But to avert suspicion and avoid the chance of scandal, Editha had not herself been the direct means of introducing the bill-broker into fashionable circles. Lady Lechmere, who was privy to her friend's intrigue, had cheerfully undertaken this task. Accordingly, Emmerson had first appeared as the guest of Lady Lechmere; and therefore the supposition was, that in this capacity had he been introduced to Lady Curzon, and thus formed her acquaintance.

The reader has already seen that Emmerson was a veritable money-grubber—stern and implacable in his financial dealings—intensely selfish, unprincipled, and hollow-hearted. But he had become completely infatuated with Lady Curzon. Not only did her extraordinary beauty and her glowing temperament exercise a magic influence over a man of strong sensuality and licentious ardour; but his vanity was also supremely flattered in possessing so aristocratic a mistress. When he beheld that woman of dazzling beauty, elegant manners, and brilliant accomplishments, enter the ball-room in all the glory, pride, and effulgence of her rank and her loveliness, he felt that it was worth any sacrifice to be enabled to say to himself, "That woman—the cynosure of all admiration—the centre of all regards—the object of all devotion—that woman is mine!" Then, on accosting her and being received with a smile, all the sweetness of which was not allowed to appear in the presence of observers, but was shed upon him as it were in the furtiveness of a rapid sidelong look,—to feel that while men of the proudest titles and loftiest rank, were gazing with admiration, passion, and desire upon that lady of warm and glowing beauty,—to feel, we say, that he, the mere citizen, without birth or aristocratic halo, was the master of all those charms,—this was indeed flattering to the pride of a vain, conceited, self-sufficient, and to some extent weak-minded person, such as Emmerson.

But he had the good sense not to accost her the moment she entered the room—not to obtrude himself upon her, nor pointedly thrust himself amidst the aristocratic circle of gallants by whom she was immediately surrounded: much less did he attempt to elbow away any one who for a moment might appear to be enacting the part of rivalry. With consummate duplicity Editha had made him believe that she really loved him, and that it was not his gold which purchased her favours, but that he himself was the object of her disinterested affection. Strong, therefore, in the conceit with which she had thus inbued him, and to which his infatuation rendered him so easily accessible, he exhibited no jealousy when he saw her smiling upon others who were really handsome and possessed of qualifications calculated to win a woman's heart. Quietly biding his time, as it were, he waited until the first dazzling effects of her presence had passed away, and when the evening was somewhat more advanced and her admirers began to flit about elsewhere: then was it that Mr. Emmerson availed himself of the opportunity to approach Editha, and take a seat by her side.

For a short time they conversed together upon indifferent topics: but presently Lady Curzon rose, saying with a smile, "Give me your arm, and let us visit the card-room for a few minutes."

Thither they accordingly proceeded: it was not however, to gaze upon the card-players, nor to observe what was going on in this room that Lady Curzon had desired to be conducted thither; but it was because there were comparatively few persons in this apartment, and therefore it was more easy to converse without restraint. Accordingly, seating themselves on a sofa at a distance from the card-players, the aristocratic lady and her citizen paramour began to discourse in a confidential manner.

"You are truly beautiful to-night, Editha," said Emmerson, gazing with unfeigned rapture upon the charming creature who affected to love him.

"And you also appear to great advantage," she replied, although in reality his sallow complexion, hard features, and looks denoting the driver of close bargains, filled her with a disgust which only a consummate duplicity enabled her to conceal.

"And is it possible," he said, drinking intoxication from her glances,—"is it possible that *you*—the courted, the caressed, and the brilliant idol of fashion—really love *me*, the unpretending, unassuming man of business?"

"You know that I love you," she answered, fixing upon him a look that seemed full of passion, while her magnificent eyes vibrated like stars. "Have I not shown you that I love you? do I not incur constant risks in order that I may lavish upon you the proofs of my affection?"

"Yes, yes," murmured Emmerson, his head losing itself in the ebriety of his feelings. "But will you always love me thus?"

"Do you doubt it?" she asked, her looks assuming an expression of mournful reproach.

"But did you not love your husband when you first married him?—then did you not love Colonel Malpas?" asked Emmerson softly.

"Oh! mention not the name of that vile wretch!" exclaimed Editha, the glow of indignation suffusing her splendid countenance and dyeing even her neck and bosom with its mantling vividness. "But yes—we will speak of him for one moment," she observed, checking her wrathful feelings as a sentiment of curiosity suddenly inspired her: "and that is in order that I may ask what has become of him?"

"He is still an inmate of the King's Bench," answered Emmerson. "He has made two or three endeavours to release himself by what is called bail; but the securities proposed have never been accepted by the judge—and therefore he still lingers in prison."

"Where I hope you intend to keep him as long as you can," said Lady Curzon, with the evident bitterness of a deeply cherished vengeance.

"Depend upon it, Editha, I will keep him there

as long as I am able," returned Emmerson. "Indeed, were he my own brother or father, if he had given offence to *you*, he should be punished with all possible severity."

"You seem never wearied of giving me proofs of your affection," said Lady Curzon. "And yet I am always taking advantage of your kindness—your goodness towards me. Indeed, this very night have I a favour to ask——"

"Name it, name it, dear Editha," said the infatuated Emmerson: "tell me what I can do to prove my devotion."

"Most humiliating and distressing for me is it to speak of money matters," said Lady Curzon, affecting to be overwhelmed with confusion: "but you know how I am situated——"

"Say not another word," interrupted the bill-broker. "But may I not have the pleasure—the ineffable pleasure—of writing you a cheque this very night for what you may require, so that your faithful Gertrude may procure you the amount at my banker's the first thing in the morning? Will you not, I ask, afford me that opportunity?" he urged with a look of deep meaning and in a tone of impassioned entreaty.

"Ah! can you not imagine that I have already made the necessary arrangements?" said Editha, with downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, while she played archly and coquettishly with her fan.

"Yes—I dared to anticipate this happiness—this renewed experience of paradise!" returned Emmerson: "and therefore I am not expected home at Clapham to-night."

"Gertrude will come hither at midnight," said Editha, with a look of intelligence: "half-an-hour afterwards you must be at the corner of the street with a hackney-coach."

Emmerson threw upon his charming mistress a look of intoxicated delight; and they then quitted the card-room, returning to the more spacious saloons where the dancing was in progress. Here they separated for the present,—Emmerson joining a group of gentlemen with whom he was well acquainted, inasmuch as their promissory notes were all in his strong box in Nicholas Lane,—while, on the other hand, the Countess of Curzon accepted an invitation from some nobleman to join the dance.

A little after midnight Editha watched an opportunity to steal away, unperceived, from the brilliant throng in the splendid saloons: and ascending a staircase, she threaded a long carpetted passage with the air of one to whom the place was quite familiar. Opening a door at the end of this passage, she entered a bed-chamber where a cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and wax-tapers were already lighted upon the table. Her own ermine cloak was likewise there, lying upon the bed.

Carefully locking the door by which she had entered, Editha opened another one exactly facing it. This second door communicated with a back staircase, feebly lighted by a suspended lamp. For a few minutes the Countess remained standing at the head of this staircase, as if in expectation of some arrival. Such was the case. A small bell was heard to tinkle: and at the signal—for a signal it assuredly was—Editha hastily descended the staircase and unlocked a door at the bottom. This door opened into a bye street; and a female figure, muffled in an ample cloak and wearing a thick black veil, at once crossed the threshold.

The door was closed and locked again; and Editha, followed by the muffled figure, hastened up into the bed-chamber. The new-comer now threw off her bonnet, veil, and cloak, and revealed the bewitching person of Miss Gertrude, the lady's-maid.

A somewhat singular scene now took place: for on the one hand, Lady Curzon began to put off her magnificent apparel, while on the other hand Gertrude likewise proceeded to undress herself. Had any concealed observer been nigh, and in a position to peep at all that was going on, he could not fail to have noticed that the lady and the lady's-maid were exactly of the same height, but that the figure and bust of Gertrude were the least thing fuller and more swelling than the lighter symmetry of her mistress. Nevertheless, the garments of the one would fit the other—as was indeed very soon shown on the present occasion: for while Editha assumed the modest apparel of her dependant, the latter proceeded to deck herself in the brilliant vesture of the Countess. Even to the very pearls and other ornaments did Gertrude take as it were the place of her mistress; and during the exchange of garments a great deal of roguish laughter and a great many sly looks passed between the lady and the lady's-maid.

At length, when these mysterious toilettes were completed, Editha assisted Gertrude to envelope herself in the splendid ermine cloak, the hood of which the girl drew so completely over her countenance as most effectually to shade it. She then issued from the chamber—not by the private door and back staircase by which she had entered, but by the other door opening upon the long carpetted passage.

Thus apparelled in the shining amber-coloured robe and enveloped in the splendid ermine cloak, with a stray curl or two of her own beautiful jetty hair peeping forth from beneath the hood, Gertrude might well indeed have been taken for the Countess of Curzon. To enact this part was all the more easy, inasmuch as at that particular period the cloak-hoods were entirely the fashion for ladies, on issuing forth from balls, parties, theatres, &c; and like the Spanish mantillas or the Turkish veils, they were used so completely to conceal the countenance as to afford no mean auxiliary to the intrigues of gallantry.

Lady Lechmere, who was deep in all the secrets of her friend Editha, was waiting on the first landing for the appearance of the disguised Gertrude; and making a signal to a servant who stood in the hall below, the cry of "Lady Curzon's carriage!" wass immediately sent forth into the street.

"Now, my dear Countess," said Lady Lechmere, as she accompanied the disguised Gertrude down the stairs, and thence through the hall as far as the very threshold of the mansion—"you do well to wrap yourself up in this manner: the night is bitterly cold—and coming out of hot rooms, it is enough to give you your death, susceptible of the chill as you are. Good night, my dear Countess," she exclaimed more loudly still.

And Gertrude, enacting the part of the said Countess, shook Lady Lechmere by the hand with every appearance of the most friendly cordiality:

then tripping lightly into the carriage, she was whirled away to Grosvenor Street.

In the meautime the real Countess of Curzon, completely disguised in Gertrude's apparel—wearing the ample cloak and the thick veil of that complaisant lady's-maid—descended the private staircase, and emerged by the side-door into the bye-street, at the corner of which Mr. Emmerson was waiting with a hackney-coach. Into the vehicle they got, and were driven as far as Oxford Street, where they alighted; and thence they proceeded on foot to Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of infamy in Soho Square.

CHAPTER XCVI.

THE LADY'S-MAID.

THE carriage in which Gertrude was seated, arrived in a few minutes at Curzon House, Grosvenor Street. The watchful hall-porter, on the alert for his noble mistress's return, immediately opened the front door; and Gertrude, with the cloak-hood drawn over her countenance, issued from the carriage, ascended the stone steps in front of the mansion, and was passing rapidly through the hall towards the staircase, when the hall-porter said, "Please your ladyship, my lord has come back."

If death were really a phantom that appeared to those whom it was about to bear away from the realms of earth, then not even the presence of the grim destroyer suddenly starting up before the young lady's-maid, would have caused her so mortal a terror as this announcement which the porter made. It struck upon her brain like the blow of a hammer—pierced her heart with the pang of a fiery arrow—and then the next moment sent an ice-chill quivering through her entire frame. Her feet suddenly appeared to become heavy as lead, and refused to perform their office. As one who in a night-mare seeks to fly from some hideous object, but fancies that he has not the power to drag his limbs along, so was it with Gertrude. But still, while thus transfixed to the spot, and leaning against the hall-table to prevent herself from falling, she tenaciously kept the ermine hood closed over her countenance.

The hall-porter, being overcome with drowsiness, had hurried away into the side-room where he slept: and thus he did not observe that his announcement of the Earl's return had produced any extraordinary effect upon her whom he of course believed to be the Countess herself.

But the Earl, who had heard the carriage stop and the front door open, now issued forth from the dining-room where he had been sitting; and the sudden appearance of the nobleman startled Gertrude into new life, and not only relieved her feet from the leaden sensation that had paralysed their power, but gave to them the fleetest wings.

"Well, Editha," said the Earl, as he issued from the dining-room: "not a word of welcome?—not a syllable of any kind? Not even a look of recognition?"

But his lordship suddenly stopped short in mingled astonishment and dismay: for Gertrude flew rather than walked towards the stairs, up which she bounded with such a marvellous agility that she was out of sight in a moment.

"Perdition!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, a whole hurricane of suspicions sweeping through his brain: and away in pursuit of the fugitive did he rush.

As he was half-way up the stairs he heard a door closed violently and locked as suddenly up above. Conjecturing that it was the door of his wife's boudoir, he hastened thither—and, as he expected, found it fast.

"Editha, open this door—I insist upon it!" he said, with his lips at the keyhole so as to speak only in a whisper that might not be overheard by any of the other members of the household.

No answer was returned—and the Earl spoke not only louder, but in a more menacing tone. Still there was no response. The Earl's suspicions became a thousand times more poignant, though not more definite: at all events he could conjecture nothing but that there must have been a lover concealed in his wife's boudoir, and that in a sudden panic-terror she had rushed up to screen him. He accordingly threatened to force the door unless it were immediately unlocked.

Gertrude, half-wild with alarm, saw that another moment's delay would produce a fearful scandal throughout the house: and she therefore unlocked the door. She had thrown off the ermine cloak, but still remained in the ball costume. Pale as death—her half-exposed bosom heaving convulsively, and her hands joined in entreaty—she fell upon her knees as the Earl entered the boudoir.

"Heavens! what is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed, as he at once recognised the beautiful lady's-maid.

But Gertrude could give no response: the truth she dared not tell—and no falsehood came ready-made to her lips in that moment of indescribable terror. Speechless therefore did she remain, but gazing up at her astounded and bewildered master with so frightened and deprecating a regard that it showed she expected little mercy at his hands.

The Earl of Curzon closed the door of the boudoir, and leaning back against it, gazed down in speechless astonishment upon the kneeling girl. There she was—clad in the splendid raiment of her mistress, and with Editha's pearls, too, on her hair and round her neck! Yes—and she had returned home muffled up in Editha's own ermine cloak! But it was impossible that she could have personated the Countess at Lady Lechmere's grand entertainment: she must have assumed that dress *after* her mistress had figured in it at the ball, and she must have come home thus disguised in the carriage in order to afford Editha an opportunity of remaining out elsewhere!

Such were the Earl's reflections. Yes—he saw it all: the manœuvre was palpable enough! And now, too, did a cloud of recollections gush in unto his mind, and a light simultaneously broke upon them, clearing up all that was mysterious therein before. The incidents of *that night* when for the *first* time he suspected his wife's fidelity, all sprang up as vividly to his mind's eye as if they were just being enacted over again!

And what were the incidents of that memorable night? Be it remembered that on the occasion to which we must thus retrospect, the Earl of Curzon had entered a hackney-coach and planted himself immediately opposite his own mansion, in order to watch Editha's movements, and that he saw a female

figure, cloaked and veiled, enter the private carriage and drive away. In the hackney-coach he had followed the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, and had seen the veiled figure enter her ladyship's mansion. Then he was satisfied that it was his wife whom he had been watching. It must next be remembered that on returning home on foot, he had encountered *another* veiled and cloaked figure, whom he had fancied to be Gertrude; and when he endeavoured to engage her in conversation and make love to her, she at first mutely rejected his overtures and then screamed out.

These were the incidents over which the Earl retrospected; and he was *now* convinced that on that occasion there had been an exchange of apparel, and that it was really *Gertrude* whom he had seen proceed in the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, and *his own Countess* whom he had importuned with his overtures in the street!

That such had indeed been the case he was *now* the more convinced, on calling to mind certain other little incidents that had occurred on the same evening. And what were they? First, he had thought to meet his wife in the hall when the carriage came back; but she whom he then took to be his wife, had flitted past him, rushed up-stairs, and disappeared from his view. Almost immediately after, be it recollected, he had seen *her whom he took for Gertrude* hastening up the stairs, and overtaking her he had again addressed some words to her—but she had broken away and bounded up the stairs. This second equivoque, as it then happened, and as he *now* read it, appeared entirely confirmatory of the fact that the lady and the lady's-maid had changed apparel on the memorable evening alluded to, and that he had in reality taken Gertrude for his wife and his wife for Gertrude!

All these recollections and the construction which he now put upon the incidents themselves, were the subject of not more than a few moments' reflection, though we have taken several minutes to recapitulate the circumstances and make the explanation apparent to the reader. To the Earl it was speedily clear as daylight: he saw it all—understood it all; for the complete clue to those incidents of *the past* was now afforded by the startling exposure of the intrigues of *the present!*

Gertrude, who was kneeling at his feet, had no difficulty in understanding from the varied though rapid expression which swept over his countenance, what was passing in his mind: and now the keen sense of all the tremendous dangers which threatened her mistress, inspired the girl, who neither lacked heroism nor artfulness, with a resolution to save her if possible.

"Oh! my lord," she exclaimed, rising from her knees, but still maintaining her hands clasped; "forgive me—pardon me—if I have dared to assume a dress belonging to her ladyship! I know that it was very wrong—most arrogant and presumptuous on my part——"

"Ah! Miss Gertrude," interrupted the Earl, with a bitter irony in his accents; "the artifice is ingenious, but it will not succeed. 'Tis true that you might have borrowed the Countess's dress: but how came the Countess's carriage to bring you home from Lady Lechmere's?"

Thus speaking, with a voice and look showing that he was not to be deceived, he pushed hastily by the discomfited girl, and seized upon Edith's writing-desk which stood upon a table. On the former occasion when he had searched that desk, be it remembered, one of his own keys fitted it; and he now therefore had no difficulty in opening the desk again.

"Her ladyship is lost!" thought Gertrude within herself, as in cruel alarm she contemplated the Earl's proceeding: for the abigail was pretty well assured that the desk would furnish proofs of her ladyship's amours. Resolved to save the Countess, however, at any risk, and indeed at any sacrifice if it were possible, Gertrude advanced up to the table, and seizing her noble master's hand, she said in a low deep tone, "I conjure your lordship not to consummate this outrage against your innocent wife, nor give way to any suspicions which my folly and indiscretion may have excited!"

The Earl was too much tortured by the pangs of jealousy to experience any flaming up of a sensual passion, through the contact of that soft warm hand which was thus purposely placed in contact with his own: but looking up, he met the earnest and imploring gaze which the pretty abigail's dark eyes fixed upon him. Then suddenly recollecting that on the former occasion of his suspicions being awakened against his wife, he had resolved to win over Gertrude to his interest if possible—and therefore seizing the present opportunity,—he suddenly took both her hands in his own, and assuming a tender look, said, "My dear girl, you are deep in the confidence of your mistress: tell me everything, and I swear that I will always be your friend. I will never desert you—I will place you in a comfortable position, and will bestow upon you as much of my love as it is in my nature to experience or be able to give."

Thus speaking, he drew Gertrude towards him and passed his arm around her waist. The young woman not only suffered herself to be thus treated with a tenderness that might not probably stop there, but actually encouraged him to take farther advantage of the opportunity, the circumstances, and the hour: for she pressed closer to him, gazing up into his countenance with looks that at first only simulated an amorous feeling, but speedily began to swim with the wanton langour of really nascent desires. Indeed, when first she placed her hand in contact with that of the Earl, it was as a provocative to his passions—the execution of a sudden resolve to throw herself in as a means of diverting his attention from the pursuit on which it was fixed, and thus by her own sacrifice endeavour to save the Countess. At the same time, it must be confessed that Gertrude's sense of virtue was not very strong, inasmuch as she could so readily make up her mind to immolate her own honour in the hope of screening that of her mistress.

"Well, what reply do you mean to give me?" asked the nobleman, now pressing his lips to her's. "Will you transfer your devotion from the Countess to me? will you, in fact, give me your love and become worthy of mine? Tell me, Gertrude—what am I to expect from you?—what will you do?"

"My lord, my lord," she murmured, now seeking as it were to nestle in his bosom, "I have nothing to reveal that could in any way compromise her ladyship. But come—let us leave this boudoir—and if you wish, I will accompany you to your own room——"

"Ah! Gertrude," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, who at any other time would have been worked up to a frenzy of desire by the contact of those voluptuous charms and by the provocative looks of the young girl who seemed ready to abandon her virgin innocence to his embrace: but other and fiercer fires were now consuming him—and the temptations of the siren wanton were ineffectual upon a heart scorching with the hell of its unappeasable jealousies. "Ah! Gertrude," he exclaimed, extricating himself from the half-embrace in which she had enfolded him,—"you are in league with your mistress—too much so, I fear, to enable you to devote yourself to me!"

"Oh! my lord," she exclaimed, as the tears of mingled vexation and wounded pride rolled down her cheeks, "I thought that you did care for me a little; but now I perceive that you only sought to trifle with me——"

"Ah! I am afraid that 'tis I who have been trifled with," exclaimed the Earl bitterly: and at the same time he began dragging forth the contents of Editha's writing-desk.

Gertrude saw that farther remonstrance and artifice were unavailing; and smarting under a deep sense of humiliation at the rejection of the overtures which she had so pointedly made, she stood by in sullen silence. Not only was she vexed at the failure of her artifice; but her natural woman's-pride was hurt and wounded.

"Here!" suddenly exclaimed the Earl, after turning over a number of letters of no particular consequence, but at length lighting upon that very self-same one which had aroused his suspicions on the former occasion: "here!" he cried, tossing it to Gertrude—"take and read this, and then persist in telling me, if you dare, that you are not in the confidence of your mistress."

The girl took the note which was thus angrily and contemptuously flung at her, and read its contents as follow:—

"I have received your hasty note, my dear Editha, and send you a reply by Gertrude. Yes—I will be at home all the evening, and will adopt the usual precautions. You have nothing to fear on that account. The servant shall receive orders *to admit no one but the Countess of Curzon.* But are you certain that you can trust the girl?

"Your affectionate friend,
"KATHERINE LECHMERE."

Eagerly and intently did the Earl of Curzon watch the countenance of Gertrude as she perused that billet; and the girl felt the tell-tale blush stealing over her countenance—a blush which, were it to seal her doom, she had not the power to restrain. Besides, she was hurt at the moment at the doubt implied in the note relative to her own trust-worthiness: but a second thought showed her that the Countess was not blameable for what Lady Lechmere wrote.

"Now, young woman, will you confess?" said the Earl, as he took back the note from her hand: "or will you dare my vengeance by your obstinacy?"

"I know nothing about it, my lord—I know nothing about it! You may kill me," she added, with hysterical vehemence; "but I shall confess nothing, because there is nothing to confess."

"We shall see," muttered the Earl, with concentrated passion; and he continued his examination of the contents of the writing-desk.

One after another he glanced at the papers and tossed them aside; but presently he drew forth an envelope addressed to the Countess in a bold mercantile hand and with the word "Private" in the corner.

Hastily opening this packet, the Earl discovered that it contained several bills of exchange, the acceptances of which at first struck him to be his own: but perceiving that they were drawn by Percy Malpas, he instantaneously knew that he had never put his name to such securities at all in favour of the Colonel. A closer examination showed him that the acceptance, written in his own name, was a forgery; and on looking at the back he perceived the endorsement of Emmerson. Ten thousand demons now appeared to be tearing at the Earl's heart, while vulture-talons were fastening upon his brain, as some portion of the truth became revealed to his comprehension. For he saw—he understood—he comprehended but too well that it was his wife who had forged his name to those bills, and the forgery had been perpetrated in favour of Colonel Malpas: then what else could he surmise but that the Colonel had been Editha's paramour?

Poor Gertrude now indeed felt more than ever convinced that her beloved mistress was lost without redemption. She knew of those bills—knew that Emmerson had sent them back—recollected that the packet had been delivered one day to the Countess when seated in the boudoir with two or three lady-friends—and remembered also that Editha had hurriedly consigned that packet to her desk at the moment, with the intention of destroying its contents when alone. But the oversight on Editha's part in neglecting to do so, now threatened to prove fatal indeed; and the poor girl, as all these thoughts swept through her brain, trembled to the deepest confines of her whole being.

The Earl of Curzon had become ghastly pale,—so that his naturally handsome countenance was now almost hideous to gaze upon, while the sinister light that shone in his eyes bespoke terrible plans of vengeance already revolving in his mind. Flinging a fearfully sardonic look upon Gertrude, but without breathing a word, he secured Lady Lechmere's note and the packet of forged bills about his person; and finding no other document of any consequence in the writing-desk, he tossed back the various letters and papers which he had disturbed, but without giving himself the trouble to re-lock the desk. There was now no necessity to attempt any concealment as to the search which he had instituted!

But he did not immediately leave the room: he appeared to hesitate what course to pursue. He looked at Gertrude—not with the gaze of desire—no heart had he at this moment for tender thoughts or sensual pursuits: his outraged honour and his wife's crimes were the all-engrossing subject of his thoughts—the all-powerful influence that enchained his heart's keenest emotions! But he fixed his eyes upon Gertrude for a few moments, to ascertain whether there were any signs of contrition about her—whether, in a word, there was any chance of her turning against her mistress. But though her countenance was also pale as his own, it nevertheless expressed naught save a moody sullenness, mingled with an expression of hatred,—as if on the one hand she knew the case

was desperate so far as her mistress was concerned, but that on the other she longed to wreak her vengeance upon the Earl himself for having discovered his wife's perfidy.

The nobleman was too proud to reiterate his proposals to a girl who gave him no encouragement to do so; and he was about to quit the boudoir, when he suddenly recollected that Gertrude might steal out of the house and warn Editha of what was in store for her—thereby preparing her to meet a storm which the Earl was desirous should burst with overwhelming suddenness upon her head. Accordingly, throwing another significant glance upon the abigail, he said with a cold irony, "Since you are so fond of personating your mistress with regard to her dress, Gertrude, you may now occupy her place in this boudoir till the morning: for I suppose that she purposes to remain abroad all night."

Having thus spoken, the Earl of Curzon stalked out of the room, locking the door and taking the key with him.

CHAPTER XCVII.

INTREPIDITY.

When thus left alone, Gertrude stood gazing in dull vacancy for some moments upon the writing-desk which had furnished the proofs of Editha's criminality. Slowly awakening from this stupor of mingled dread and dismay, the abigail began to lay aside the splendid apparel in which she was decorated. Depositing the pearls and the ornaments upon the toilette table, she put off the amber-coloured robe, and then negligently and irresolutely began to comb out her long dark hair.

But it was evident that she was revolving some idea in her mind, and that whether she should retire to rest or carry out this idea constituted the indecision in which she was hovering. Laying down the comb, she seated herself upon a sofa; and supporting her well-shaped head upon her really beautiful hand, she began seriously to deliberate upon the risks and chances of the project which every moment was becoming more firmly settled in her mind. Her naturally mischievous eyes were now full of a serious expression,—while her cherry lips became compressed with the firmness which is characteristic of a heroine. It was evident that she was revolving some desperate or dangerous scheme: and indeed, if she were just now over ready to yield up her honour in the hope of diverting the Earl's attention from the proceedings of the Countess, she was now as devotedly resolving to risk her life in order to serve that mistress whom she loved so well!

Suddenly starting from her recumbent posture and from her deep reverie, she glanced towards the time-piece which stood upon the mantle; but that clock had stopped, and she knew not what hour it was. But calculating that it was about one o'clock when she had returned from Lady Lechmere's—that the scene with the Earl had occupied half-an-hour—and that a similar interval had elapsed since his departure from the room, she argued that it must now be two o'clock in the morning. Her calculation as to the time was by no means a trivial thing, even in the midst of the important considerations that were crowding through her mind. The fact was that the watchman of the district invariably passed along Grosvenor Street about ten minutes past every hour throughout the night; and the project which the venturous damsel had in view, could not very well be carried out with success if the aforesaid nocturnal guardian happened to be in the neighbourhood at the time.

Supposing it, therefore, to be about two o'clock, she reckoned that if she let twenty minutes pass, she would be ensuring the safety of her scheme: and winding up the time-piece. she set it going. She now opened the drawers—took forth all the splendid cachmere shawls and the strongest satin scarves belonging to her mistress—and these she rolled up lengthwise into the form of a rope, fastening them together. Remorselessly and unhesitatingly did she thus treat those handsome articles of apparel which in the aggregate cost hundreds of guineas—twisting and knotting them just as ruthlessly as if they were old rags: but then she had in view a certain project the success of which was a matter outweighing the price of all the finery in the world!

In this manner full twenty minutes were passed; and then the damsel prepared to carry her bold design into execution. First she pushed a heavy chest of drawers up against the window; and completely round this ponderous piece of furniture did she pass the rope which she had made, not fastening it, but allowing it to run loosely as if over the wheel of a pulley. Then, against the chest of drawers she placed the sofa, a great arm-chair, and other things to keep it firm and steady;—and all this being done, she returned again to the ransacking of her mistress's wardrobe. But this time it was for some fitting garment to put on. Enveloping herself in the darkest coloured cloak she could find, and selecting the simplest straw-bonnet that presented itself, she now entered upon the crowning act of this night's strange drama.

Gently opening the lower part of the window, she listened for a few moments—and no sound of human voice nor footfall reached her ears. Then she peeped forth—and by the mingled moon-light and lamp-light she was enabled to assure herself that the street was entirely deserted. All was still: not a light was even visible at any opposite window. Now, then, was the moment—now the opportunity. Nor did the heroic Gertrude shrink from the danger of her self-imposed task—appalling though that peril must have seemed to be, notwithstanding the marvellous intrepidity of her soul.

Having extinguished the light in the boudoir, she flung forth the rope in such a manner that it was doubled, both ends descending towards the pavement below: she then passed out of the window—and firmly clutching the double rope in both hands, while her feet clung to it also, she began to lower herself with amazing presence of mind. But scarcely had she thus commenced her fearful descent, when the straw-bonnet flew from her head and the cloak became detached from her person,—thus leaving her in a state of semi-nudity and her hair all flowing wildly. The slanting moon-beams of silver played upon the countenance that expressed all the decision of a heroine—upon the bare bosom which remained upheaved with a strong feeling of suspense—and on the naked arms, so

white and well-rounded, which clung with such tenacity to the double rope. Fortunate perhaps was it for the damsel that she got rid of the encumbrance of the ample cloak, the folds of which might only have embarrassed the nimble play of her delicate feet and robust legs as she slid gently down. Her lithe form, possessing all the suppleness of a Bayadere and the elasticity of a serpent, seemed to adapt itself yieldingly to the swaying of the rope and to every movement that she herself made in her perilous descent; nor less was it apparent that if with a perfect symmetry she blended great muscular power, to her love for her mistres she also united an extraordinary moral courage.

But 'tis done!—her delicate feet touch the pavement—and she stands safely in the street! A minute has scarcely elapsed since she crept forth from the window above! The moment she thus stands upon firm ground, she picks up the cloak and the bonnet, and her semi-nude form is again enveloped in the capacious mantle, while her disordered hair is gathered up hastily beneath the straw-hat. Then she takes the end of one length of the rope only, and by pulling it towards her, draws it down from the chest of drawers in the boudoir, just as a rope passes over a drum-wheel when one end is detached. She now coils up this rope of shawls with the utmost despatch—conceals it under her mantle—and hurries away. Thus the only outward and visible trace that is left of her exploit, is the open window of the boudoir: but being an upper one, the watchman—even if he saw it when passing by—would not think it necessary to raise an alarm on that account.

Away sped Gertrude to Soho Square: and on reaching Mrs. Gale's establishment, she was immediately admitted, some of the servants of that establishment remaining up all night. On asking for Mrs. Gale, she was told that this "lady" had retired to rest: but Gertrude, by stating that her

business was of the utmost importance, induced one of the servants to arouse the mistress of the place. Finally, after some little trouble, Gertrude was enabled to obtain an interview with Mrs. Gale: and the moment they were alone together, the damsel requested that she might see the Countess of Curzon immediately. Mrs. Gale asked if anything unpleasant had occurred; to which Gertrude replied in the affirmative, without however entering into particulars. Mrs. Gale, notwithstanding, heard enough to induce her to repair to the chamber where the Countess and Emmerson were together: and to be brief, in a few minutes Editha was conducted to the apartment where Gertrude had waited.

Mrs. Gale withdrew: and the Countess of Curzon, who had only huddled on a few clothes, exclaimed with a tone and look of poignant alarm, "Good heavens, Gertrude! what has happened?"

The abigail proceeded to narrate all that had taken place,—how the Earl had returned—how he had discovered that she was disguised in her mistress's apparel—how he had opened the desk and possessed himself of Lady Lechmere's note as well as the forged bills—how he had locked her in the boudoir—and how she had escaped thence in the manner just described.

It would be impossible to convey an idea of the thrilling, feverish, and rapid transitions of emotion through which the Countess passed, as these hurried incidents struck one after the other upon her ear. Alarm at the return of her husband—terror at the discoveries he had made—admiration of Gertrude's devoted conduct—the excitement of absolute horror at her perilous descent—and then fresh fears and apprehensions on her own account,—these were the startling and stirring feelings which in rapid succession were conjured up by Gertrude's narrative. But when the intrepid young woman displayed that coil of rope made of twisted shawls, and which she had brought thither, Editha's emotion of wonder and admiration triumphed for the instant over the more selfish sensations of alarm on her own account; and flinging her arms about the girl's neck, the Countess embraced her with the liveliest gratitude and affection.

"I thought your ladyship should know of all that has happened as speedily as possible," said Gertrude. "In the first place, I feared lest his lordship should by any accident suspect that you were here and come to seek you. Secondly, I thought that if when you returned home in the morning, disguised in my apparel and unprepared to receive the Earl, you suddenly encountered him, you would be so completely overwhelmed that no possible excuse or explanation would come to your aid. And thirdly, it struck me that if any tale can possibly be made up to save your ladyship's honour, it will be necessary to lose no time in putting Lady Lechmere on her guard, should the Earl take it into his head to call and question her. For all these reasons, I felt assured it would be better to warn you at once of what had occurred; and hence my resolve to escape from that boudoir and join you here at any risk."

"Never, never, dear Gertrude," exclaimed the Countess, "shall I forget this more than kindness—this positive devotion—on your part. No sister would have risked a hundredth part as much for me! But what is to be done? what on earth *can* be done? Idiot, idiot that I was to leave those bills in my desk!—yes, or to leave even so slight a clue as that note which he showed you, and the contents of which you have recapitulated to me! Ah! wretched woman that I am," she cried, wringing her hands bitterly. "Like all my five sisters—like my mother—like my aunts—like every female member, in fine, of my family—am I destined to be dishonoured and disgraced! O Gertrude, Gertrude! what a scandal—what an excitement will there be in the fashionable world to-morrow when the explosion takes place!"

"But lady—dear lady," interrupted the girl, "is all this risk that I have run to be in vain? Can you devise nothing—can you think of nothing to avert the impending ruin?"

"I do not see what can be done," answered the almost distracted Editha. "Even if I could get back unperceived into the house, the evidence is too strong against me. Those bills—those dreadful bills—and then Lady Lechmere's unfortunate note—O Gertrude, I am undone—I am undone! Ruin is inevitable—destruction is certain!"

"Yes—if you meet your misfortunes half-way, or sink down under them at once," exclaimed Gertrude. "But, happen what will, your ladyship must not stay here another minute: for if the Earl *did* come and find you in such a place—pardon me the observation—there would *then* be no hope nor chance of either explaining away existing circumstances, or of eventual reconciliation."

"Then what would you advise?" asked the Countess, with all the fluttering of painful excitement. "Whither shall I go?—what asylum shall I seek?"

"Come home, my lady—and dare it all!" rejoined Gertrude: "that is the best plan! Who knows what the chapter of accidents may turn up in your favour? But of course, if you once absent yourself from your home and the household knows it, *then* do you convict yourself beyond all redemption."

"But how, in the name of heaven, are we to enter?" demanded the Countess. "Surely not by the same way that you ere now quitted the mansion?" she said, with an hysterical laugh.

"Your ladyship forgets," said the abigail, "that if nothing had happened you would have returned home between five and six in the morning, as on former occasions."

"Yes—dressed in your apparel, my dear Gertrude," exclaimed the Countess, suddenly recollecting these matters which had been lost sight of in the poignancy of her alarm: "and I have the key of the area-door with me——Oh! all this had slipped my memory!"

"Hasten, my lady—and let us depart," said Gertrude. "Come—time presses——"

"One minute, and I will return!" exclaimed the Countess: and she quitted the room where this colloquy took place.

What she said to Emmerson on returning to him, or what they arranged between themselves during the few minutes that they hurriedly conversed while the Countess finished dressing herself, matters not now. Suffice it to say that the infatuated bill-broker wrote her ladyship a check upon his banker for a couple of thousand pounds, and that she soon afterwards quitted Mrs. Gale's establishment in company with Gertrude.

Back to Grosvenor Street did the lady and the

lady's-maid proceed together. The boudoir-window was still open; and not a light was visible in any part of the house. That Gertrude's flight had remained undiscovered was therefore evident; and that the Earl had retired to rest was presumable, if not certain.

Editha and her maid descended the area-steps and entered the house by means of a duplicate key of the servants' door which her ladyship had in her possession. During the walk home from Soho Square, they had determined what course to pursue. Most of the locks of the upper chambers were of pretty well the same pattern; and Gertrude had assured her mistress that several of the bedroom-keys fitted each other's doors, and that it was more than probable one of them would suit that of the boudoir. If this should prove to be the case, it was decided that the Countess should take possession of the boudoir, so that the Earl might be completely astounded when he went thither with the idea of liberating Gertrude in the morning,—it being also hoped by the two artful women that this mystification would render him more pliant and accessible to any artifices that might be adopted to explain away the present suspicions. But on the other hand, if no key could be found to open the boudoir, then it was resolved that the Countess should pass the night in another chamber, and that all the rest should be left entirely to the chapter of accidents.

Such were the plans deliberated upon and settled during the hurried twenty minutes' walk from Soho Square to Grosvenor Street; and now that Editha and her faithful abigail were once more within the walls of Curzon House, the heart of each beat with acute suspense. They had to grope their way in the dark, not daring to run the risk of being observed wandering about the house with a candle. Like spirits did they steal from the lower regions up into the hall; and as noiselessly and carefully did they thence ascend the principal staircase to the storeys above. There they speedily possessed themselves of half-a-dozen keys, which the expert lady's-maid, whose presence of mind exceeded that of her mistress, tried in the lock of the boudoir-door. Nor was she disappointed in the calculation she had made, inasmuch as one of them turned easily in the lock.

Editha and Gertrude entered, locking the door behind them, although the latter did not purpose to remain long in the boudoir. To shut down the window and put the furniture back into its place, were now the next steps adopted by Editha and her maid; and notwithstanding they were in the dark, they nevertheless made these adjustments as noiselessly as possible. Gertrude then assisted Editha to undress herself; and having done this, she prepared to leave her ladyship for the rest of the night—or rather for the next few hours of the morning.

"Pray sustain your spirits, my lady," said the faithful girl, "and there is no telling what may happen for the best. But mind when your ladyship locks the door after me that you take out the key, so that when his lordship comes in the morning there may be no impediment to his unlocking the door. Then what will be his surprise at finding your ladyship here instead of me!"

Editha was about to make some reply, when a noise, as of some one moving about the house, reached their ears. They remained dead silent, holding their very breath to listen. The sounds of footsteps stealthily creaking, approached the door of that boudoir: and now Gertrude, with admirable presence of mind, drew forth the key from the lock.

"Why did you do that?" asked Editha, in the lowest possible whisper.

"Oh! my dear lady," responded Gertrude, in a tone of concentrated joy, though likewise speaking in a whisper,—"because I suddenly behold a means of accomplishing your salvation! Hush—hush!"

And in a few moments, as the steps outside stopped at the door, the lady and the maid both heard a key cautiously introduced into the lock. Thereupon, the Countess of Curzon, suddenly divined the truth—that same truth which had already struck Gertrude, and the important results of which the astute girl had immediately foreseen. Yes—it was now apparent enough to Editha also: her husband, the Earl, was no doubt coming to share the couch of the lady's-maid!

A few more whispered words passed rapidly between Editha and Gertrude—but so low that they were only just audible to themselves, and could not have been heard by anybody even at a couple of yards' distance.

That the Earl was approaching without a light was certain, because not a ray gleamed through the key-hole, nor shone under the door. And now this door was slowly opened; and Gertrude, assuming the frightened tone of one suddenly starting from her sleep, exclaimed, "Who is there?"

"'Tis I, dearest Gertrude!" answered the Earl, in a tone that was tremulous with desire: and he closed the door behind him.

"But, my lord—I thought that you had conceived a hatred for me ere now?" exclaimed the abigail, in a deprecatory tone.

"Ah! but I was enraged, dear girl—cruelly enraged," replied Curzon, now pausing to lock the door. "But on retiring to rest I could not sleep—and gradually your image rose up in my mind, until at last it has so far got the better of all other thoughts and impressions, that I have resolved to enjoy a few hours of love and bliss in your arms, and leave until to-morrow the vexations, the scandals, and the exposures that may belong thereto. So let me embrace thee, dearest Gertrude—let me embrace thee!" cried the Earl, his voice now swelling with the tremulous exultation of desire mingled with anticipated triumph.

And through the utter darkness of that boudoir did he feel his way towards the couch, into which Editha—his own wife Editha—had stealthily crept, while Gertrude had glided away, after answering him, into the farthest corner of the room.

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"Wherefore will you not speak to me, dearest girl?" asked the Earl of Curzon, in a voice stifling with desire. "Ah! you murmur something with those sweet lips of your's——but I cannot catch your words——no matter——I kiss your lips, and you kiss back again! The faithless Editha——this is almost punishment enough for her perfidy, if she did but know it! But she can not know it—she will never know it! And you will turn against her, dear girl—will you not? Ah! wherefore that impatient ejaculation? Well, I will speak to you no more upon that topic—at least

for the present. To-morrow—or another time——Ah! my darling Gertrude, I love you—yes I love you: and I will forgive your taciturnity—your silence—if you will continue to lavish those tender kisses upon me!"

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About an hour afterwards, when all was still and quiet in the boudoir, some one cautiously unlocked the door and stole forth, closing the door as noiselessly again behind her, but now leaving it unlocked.

The person who thus stole forth, was Gertrude: and ascending to her own chamber on the storey above, she procured a light. With the candle in her hand, she once more descended: and this time she stole guardedly and with spirit-like tread to the Earl of Curzon's own apartment—that apartment which he had ere now left to seek the boudoir. In this apartment Gertrude forthwith instituted a minute search; and after some delay, she found what she sought concealed amongst the linen in one of the Earl's drawers. Joyous as if she had discovered a treasure, and triumphant as if she had just achieved some important victory, the damsel stole up again to her own chamber; and before she retired to rest, she set fire to a quantity of papers and threw them into the grate, gaily and cheerfully watching them till they consumed to tinder. She then extinguished the light, and laid down to repose.

But in about three hours Gertrude awoke; and it being now daylight, she got up. Having arranged her beautiful hair, so dishevelled and disordered by the prominent adventure of the preceding night, and having refreshed herself with ablutions in the chill water, she put on the plain but neat and becoming apparel of her station. When she had thus concluded her toilette, she went down-stairs to the servants' hall, to wait till her mistress's bell should ring.

The light of the new-born day had already rendered everything plainly visible within the boudoir, when the Earl of Curzon awoke from a slumber where the image of Gertrude had seemed to be strangely mingling with scenes in which his faithless wife and Colonel Malpas also figured. He rubbed his eyes—threw a hasty glance around the room—and on recognising where he was, all the incidents of the past night came trooping in with rapid march upon his memory. Turning towards his companion, a sudden ejaculation of astonishment and dismay burst from his lips, when he encountered the arch and mischievous looks—*not* of the lovely Gertrude, as he had expected—but of his own wife, the Countess Editha!

"Heavens! what means that exclamation, Charles?" said her ladyship, affecting to be concerned and even terrified at the suddenness of her husband's cry.

"Is it a dream? can it be a dream?" muttered Curzon, pressing his hand to his brow and endeavouring to concentrate all his thoughts in one focus.

"Have you been labouring under some unpleasant dream?" asked Editha, now assuming a look of tender anxiety, while at the same time, unperceived by her husband, she pulled the bell-rope that hung behind the curtains of the bed.

"I cannot understand it—it is unaccountable!" said Curzon: then turning his eyes suddenly upon Editha, he demanded abruptly, "How came *you* here?"

"How came I here!" she echoed, with a tone and look of amazement. "Is it not my own room—the boudoir where I sleep when we do not pass the night together?—and therefore should I not rather ask how came *you* here?"

"Perdition! what means it all?" exclaimed the Earl: "am I mad? or have I really been dreaming?"

At this moment the door opened; and Gertrude made her appearance in answer to the summons of the boudoir-bell. Her looks were as composed, tranquil, and sedate as if nothing extraordinary had occurred during the past night; and when the Earl thus marked her unruffled mien and saw that there was nothing sly, arch, or mischievous therein, he became more bewildered than ever. Again he pressed his hand upon his brow to steady his thoughts; and Gertrude availed herself of that opportunity to dart a sudden look of intelligence at Editha. Then did her ladyship's countenance become lighted up with an expression of joy and triumph: for she understood full well the meaning of her devoted abigail's glance—and she knew that she was saved!

"Did your ladyship ring?" asked Gertrude, in a tone as tranquil and respectful as usual.

"No," answered Editha: "you can retire."

The abigail accordingly withdrew; but scarcely had the door closed behind her, when the Earl of Curzon, starting up in the couch, exclaimed, "Ah! your ladyship has manœuvred well! You were doubtless anxious that a witness should thus behold us together, so that there may be what the lawyers call a *condonation* on my part in respect to your by-gone infidelities?"

"My lord, this to me!" exclaimed Editha, her eyes flashing fire, but rather with the triumph that blazed up in her bosom than with the anger which she assumed.

"Yes," continued the Earl of Curzon, springing from the couch and hastily huddling on the slippers, trousers, and dressing-gown in which he had sought that boudoir during the night: "you think, madam, that I am either to be deceived by mystification or over-reached by stratagem? That things have occurred which I cannot understand, I do not deny: but you will lean upon a fragile support if you fancy that because I have been seen in your bed *after* the discovery of your infidelities, I have deprived myself of legal remedy. Ah! fool that I was ever to have fancied that you, issuing from such a precious stock, would do honour to the name of Curzon! But thank God! I possess the proofs of your infidelities and crimes: and you will perhaps understand me," he added with a sardonic malignity, "when I declare that to the guilt of adultery have you superadded the black turpitude of forgery!"

"My lord!" exclaimed Editha, the richest crimson glowing beneath the soft duskiness of her skin, and mantling thus warmly not only upon the brow and the cheeks, but also the neck, the bare shoulders, and the naked bosom of the patrician lady: "you are a coward thus to insult a defenceless woman! If I had a dagger or a pistol at hand, I would lay you dead at my feet."

"Editha!" exclaimed the Earl, bending upon

her a look in which wonder and scorn, uncertainty and hate, were strangely commingled: "can it be possible that you are unaware of what took place last night?—has there really been no communion between you and Gertrude?—did I not lock her in this room?—and whether you were here concealed at the time, or whether by some means you penetrated hither afterwards, in any case must you be aware that your writing-desk furnished me with the proofs of your criminality."

"That you are base enough to ransack my desk, my lord, is probable," cried Editha, the excitement of the scene and the consciousness of her safety inspiring her with all the presence of mind requisite to enact the part of outraged innocence: "but that you discovered in that desk aught whereof I need be ashamed, I positively deny."

"By heavens! this is too much," exclaimed Curzon, his naturally handsome countenance becoming destorted with rage. "The proofs, madam, are in my possession; the note of your accomplice Lady Lechmere—the forgeries ——"

"Coward—liar!" exclaimed Editha, springing like a tigress from the couch. "If there be forgeries in the case, 'tis *you* who have forged them! Ah! doubtless the trammels of matrimony are inconvenient to a man who wishes to pursue his own numerous intrigues; and therefore you seek to get rid of your wife. But no, my lord—I defy you—I defy you!"

The Earl of Curzon now gazed with unmixed astonishment upon Editha. Indeed, for a few moments he was utterly confounded. The tone of confidence in which she spoke, the genuine indignation which appeared to inspire her, the undismayed assurance with which she met his looks, and indeed almost beat them down with her own proud and haughty ones—all this struck the nobleman speechless and motionless. And, heavens! how grandly, how sublimely beautiful seemed the Countess of Curzon at that moment—no longer soft, languishing, and amorous like a dusky houri of Mohammed's paradise, but bursting forth into the personification of Bellona the Goddess of War, so that her very beauty became terrible to gaze upon, and the eyes that were wont to burn with the fires of love, now shot forth blasting lightnings. With the scant night-dress alone draping her form—her luxuriant purply sable hair flowing in heavy masses over her shoulders and down her back—her heaving bust all exposed in its glowing firmness—one arm gracefully curved, the other extended so as with imperious gesture to enhance the force of her language—her nude feet and ankles exposed in their sculptural symmetry to the middle of the legs' robust swell—her whole figure, in fine, seemed to realise all that artist ever fancied, poet ever dreamed, or sculptor ever designed in the form of peerless beauty vindicating its outraged innocence!

But, Ah! all the glory, the magic, and the sublimity of that scene sink into degradation, shame, and infamy, when it is remembered that Editha was *really* guilty, and that the part which she now enacted was one of consummate duplicity and exquisite hypocrisy. For a few moments, we say did the Earl of Curzon remain utterly confounded—annihilated as it were—by the demeanour, the conduct, and the language of his wife. It was either the most stupendous effrontery that woman ever yet had exhibited—or else, if she were innocent, was she the victim of the most extraordinary combination of circumstances ever known. But not long did the Earl of Curzon hesitate between these alternatives. Too much a man of the world to yield a ready credulity to any appearances of innocence, and too deeply conscious of error himself not to be ever ready to believe the errors of others, he soon burst forth into a laugh of bitter scorn, exclaiming, "Ah! I see how it is, madam: you fancy that in your prudence you have destroyed all evidences of your guilt! But your memory fails you—for whatever your intentions might have been, you certainly have not altogether carried them out. I tell you that I possess *proofs* ——"

"Then produce them, my lord," said Editha, in a tone of defiance.

"I will, I will!" and he turned towards the door.

"And if you do not," she said, springing forward and detaining him by the arm for a moment,—"as a nobleman—a gentleman—a man—shall I also say as a *husband*—it will be your duty——"

"Yes, to fall upon my knees and demand pardon for this outrage—these suspicions!" ejaculated Curzon, throwing upon his wife a look of dark malignity, as much as to imply that it was perfect madness to suppose there was any chance of his being compelled to humble himself thus.

"Be it so," she observed, in a tone of confidence, as she released his arm from the firm grasp which her delicate fingers had fixed upon it.

The Earl hastened from the boudoir and sped to his own apartment, murmuring to himself, "Now for the proofs that shall overwhelm her with confusion!"

He opened the drawer—he tossed aside his linen: but the object of his search was not there! A chill struck to his heart, as the idea of some deep but inexplicable treachery flashed to his mind. Furious with rage, but trembling all over as nervously as if stricken with a palsy, he tore out the drawer from its place and emptied all its contents on the carpet. But the packet which he sought—that packet which contained Lady Lechmere's note and the forged bills—had disappeared.

No wonder indeed: for it was this same packet which Gertrude had found, and the contents of which she had burnt in her own chamber. Yes—and this was the meaning of that significant look which she had flung upon her mistress when entering the boudoir—that look which told Editha she was saved!

Pale, trembling, and overwhelmed, the Earl of Curzon sank into an arm-chair and gave way to his painful reflections. To believe that all the incidents of the past night belonged only to a dream, was ridiculous: but that he had been singularly, mysteriously, and effectually outwitted, was evident. He had not a proof—not a single proof—of his wife's guilt: and yet he knew her to be guilty. He had only just come from sharing her couch; and therefore to dream of law-proceedings was preposterous. To create an exposure and a scandal by repudiating his wife on bare suspicion, and without being enabled to follow up such an act by the usual legal process, would be only to render himself contemptible as a jealous husband.

Such were the thoughts that passed rapidly through the Earl's mind; and perceiving that he

was in every way outwitted and deprived of remedy, he suddenly made up his mind to put as good a face as possible upon the matter—that is to say, *for the present!* He accordingly returned to the boudoir, where he found Editha combing out her long shining hair. As he entered the room she turned towards him; and with a look full of calm confidence—for all her recent excitement appeared to have cooled down—she said, "Well, my lord, what aspect does the matter now wear?"

"Editha," he responded, assuming a jocular air, "I must confess that I am completely out-manœuvred. I don't know how—but I think it is tolerably clear that your maid Gertrude is a young woman of no ordinary ability and tact—for which qualities you doubtless value her so much."

"But is it also for the same reason that your lordship seeks to deprive me of her by making her your mistress?"—and as Editha gave this bitter retort, her beautiful lips curled with relentless irony.

"Well, I think that the less said upon all these things for the present, the better," returned the Earl of Curzon, affecting to laugh: and with these words he was about to quit the room, when Editha caught him by the arm. "What! is there anything more to say?" he demanded.

"Yes," she replied, with firmness of voice and decision of look: "as a nobleman, as a gentleman, and as a husband, you have to apologise for having dared to accuse me without proof."

"Oh! yes—I remember that I pledged myself to some such apology as this: and therefore," he continued, with an air of mock gravity, "I beg to tender my earnest excuses to your ladyship for having ventured to suspect your purity and fidelity; and I may add that I am now entirely convinced that you are as immaculate as a wife can be——"

"Enough!" exclaimed Editha, colouring with indignation, as her husband's tone grew more and more bantering. "You have made the apology—and that is sufficient."

The Earl affected to laugh gaily, and quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER XCVIII.

MORE MYSTIFICATION.

We may now explain to the reader the precise manner in which the Countess of Curzon had been accustomed to manage her intrigues through the agency of Lady Lechmere.

As was particularly the case in those times, with married couples in high life who did not live upon the very best terms together, the Earl and Countess of Curzon frequently occupied separate bed-chambers—the Earl having an apartment which was called his own private one, and the Countess having her boudoir. It was therefore comparatively an easy thing for her ladyship occasionally to stay out all night if she chose—the only precaution needful being to prevent the servants (Gertrude excepted) from discovering the fact. Hence the contrivance into which the reader has already obtained something more than an insight. Thus, for instance, the Countess went in full dress and in her own carriage to Lady Lechmere's house: a few hours later Gertrude met her there;—their apparel was speedily changed—and while Gertrude, playing the part of Countess, was driven back in the carriage, the Countess herself repaired whithersoever she chose. Then, at daybreak, apparelled as Gertrude, the Countess would return to the mansion in safety. If seen thus coming home by any of the servants, the supposition was that the young lady's-maid—for whom of course Editha would be taken—had passed the night at her parents' house: and on the occasions when these stratagems were to be carried into effect, Gertrude was wont to take the precaution in the evening of casually mentioning in the servants' hall, that she had received permission from her mistress to remain with her mother till the following morning.

But there was another phase which the stratagem assumed, involving a certain alteration of its details, according to circumstances. Thus, for instance, if Editha required an excuse to be absent from home for only a few hours during the evening, she would pretend to have received an invitation from Lady Lechmere to a party: but Gertrude, muffled in Editha's ermine cloak, and perhaps wearing her veil, would proceed in the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, where instead of any evening party at all, the servants would receive positive orders from their mistress to admit *only the Countess of Curzon.* Thus Gertrude, disguised as the Countess, would be shown up into Lady Lechmere's boudoir, and there remain for two or three hours, as the case might be, until the carriage came to fetch her home again. Thus, all the while, the coachman and lacquey attached to Lady Curzon's carriage would naturally suppose that it was their mistress whom they had driven to Lady Lechmere's at eight or nine and fetched home again at twelve or one: while, on the other hand, Lady Lechmere's domestics were equally remote from suspecting that it was any other than the Countess of Curzon who thus came and passed several hours *tete-à-tete* with their mistress.

The reader will now understand the meaning of that note, bearing the signature of Lady Lechmere, which the Earl of Curzon had found in his wife's writing-desk. But wherefore were all those strangely ramified precautions necessary? Because Editha was too prudent to have incurred the risk of allowing either Malpas or Emmerson to pass the night with her in her own boudoir at home: and therefore it was necessary to devise measures to enable her to meet her *paramour for the time being* at Mrs. Gale's house of accommodation in Soho Square. But of course she could not drive thither openly and fearlessly in her carriage; and when going out of an evening, she could not possibly devise any excuse to dispense with the carriage: she could not say she was going anywhere on foot or that she preferred a hackney-coach. She must therefore *seem* to use the carriage, even if she did not in reality: hence the astute arrangement of allowing Gertrude to take her place and perform her part, while she herself, modestly disguised in Gertrude's unobtrusive apparel, enjoyed unlimited freedom combined with a rare security.

Having given these few explanations, we now resume the thread of our narrative. As a matter of course, the Earl of Curzon was not satisfied at the result of the adventures which have occupied the two or three preceding chapters. As we have

already stated, he saw that he had been outwitted: but *how*, he could not altogether conjecture. That Gertrude had purloined the documents from his own apartment, he failed not to guess: but the great mystery to him was how his own wife Editha had been his partner of the couch in the boudoir instead of Gertrude. He had assuredly locked the young abigail in that boudoir; and it was her voice which he had subsequently recognised beyond all possibility of doubt, when he returned to that room later in the night. But while revolving all these things in his mind, he recollected that on seeking the couch in the boudoir, when fancying he was about to be clasped in the arms of Gertrude, he had locked the door: and he likewise recollected that in the morning the door was *unlocked*, when Gertrude entered to ask if her mistress had rung. The door, therefore, had been unlocked by somebody: and if so, the presence of Editha in the couch with him might be easily accounted for by supposing that while he slept Gertrude had risen and changed places with the Countess. Then, if this were the case, and if this supposition were the correct one, had the beautiful Gertrude been for any time his companion in that bed? At first he was inclined to believe so: but then he reflected that from the very instant he entered that couch and was clasped in the arms of the female occupying it, this female observed a profound silence—nor could he by coaxing or entreaty succeed in eliciting from her a single word. This circumstance proved, then, that it must have been Editha who was occupying that couch when he entered the room,—Editha who received him in her arms,—Editha whom he had so fondly and passionately embraced, while all the time fancying that he was enjoying the transports of love in the arms of Gertrude! It was therefore quite clear, from this chain of reasoning, that Editha must have been in the room *with* Gertrude when he went thither in the dark, and that while Editha prepared to receive him in her arms, Gertrude's voice deluded him into the belief that it was she herself who was the sole occupant of that couch which he sought.

Having come to these conclusions, the Earl of Curzon felt less satisfied and more piqued than ever. Not only had he been outwitted by his wife in every way; but he was also duped by her abigail. That he was so duped, Editha well knew: and thus the two together—mistress and maid—had not only utterly baffled all his endeavours to establish the proofs of the former's infidelity, but were enabled to have a good laugh together at his expense. Nothing, in fact, could be more ridiculous than the position which he felt he occupied in the eyes not only of Editha, but also of Gertrude: and he was determined to be revenged on them both. Of course, as the master of the house, he could at once have discharged the young lady's-maid: but as there was no ostensible cause to allege for taking such a decisive proceeding upon himself, it would appear most arbitrary and unjust—besides its being a most unusual thing for the husband to interfere with the wife's special dependants. Moreover, the mere discharge of Gertrude would in itself be an act for which she would care so little, as to be totally incommensurate with the amount of revenge he sought. She had humbled his pride—she had aided her mistress to baffle and outwit him: and though not naturally of a cowardly character or unmanly disposition, the Earl resolved upon some signal and cruel revenge.

The reader will perhaps wonder why he did not call upon Lady Lechmere to see what he could discover relative to his wife's proceedings. But he was too much a man of the world not to know full well that to whatsoever extent Lady Lechmere connived at or assisted Editha's intrigues, she would be prepared to defend and protect them by giving an indignant denial to any accusation on the subject. Besides which, the Earl had no idea of proclaiming to the world the ignominious fact that he knew himself to be a cuckold, but could not prove it, and was therefore compelled to endure his wife's infidelities.

There was however one person whom he resolved to see: and this was Emmerson. But not for a moment did it strike the Earl that the bill-broker had become his wife's paramour. Whether they were even acquainted or not, he did not exactly know: but that Emmerson had *privately* sent her back the bills which she had forged in favour of Colonel Malpas, was evident enough. How had this occurrence been brought about?—was Emmerson aware of Editha's guilt?—and if so, to what extent? These were the particulars which the Earl of Curzon was desirous to ascertain: and therefore, after a hurried breakfast, did he mount his horse, and attended by his groom, repair to the money-making regions of the City.

Mr. Emmerson was seated alone in his private office in Nicholas Lane, pondering somewhat gloomily on the occurrences of the preceding night, and wondering what on earth had been the issue of the adventure. From Editha's lips he had hurriedly heard how her husband had returned and had found the packet of forged bills in her desk—and in a few hastily-exchanged sentences they had agreed upon the outline of some tale, to be told by himself, should the Earl call on him to demand any explanation of the circumstance of his name being on the back of those forged bills. But whether this story, so hurriedly and imperfectly concocted, would serve any purpose at all, even if the Earl should call on him,—or whether the discoveries made by his lordship were of too serious and comprehensive a nature to be explained away by sophistry or accounted for by artifice,—these were the uncertainties between which Mr. Emmerson was painfully hovering at the moment when the office-boy entered to announce the Earl of Curzon!

Emmerson could not help trembling from head to foot through fear of detection, exposure, and chastisement. But not suffering his emotions to be perceived, he bade the boy at once introduce his lordship. Then, as the Earl made his appearance extending his hand with a sort of affable condescension and aristocratic patronage towards him, he felt persuaded that whatever might have been the issue of the previous night's adventure, he himself remained unsuspected.

"Pray sit down, my lord," said Emmerson, bustling about to hand the nobleman a chair. "Will your lordship take a glass of wine and a biscuit? It is just twelve o'clock—and though perhaps not lunch-time in the fashionable regions whence your lordship has just come——"

"Thank you, Emmerson," said the Earl, carelessly. "I have not long breakfasted. But what news in the City?"

"Why, would your lordship believe it—that conceited little humbug Mr. Under-sheriff Fire has actually got made an Alderman; and Tibbs, who has so long managed the revenues of the ward of Guzzleton, has been obliged to resign at last. But what is the business that has procured me the honour of a call from your lordship this forenoon?"

"You remember, Emmerson," said the Earl, "that when I called upon you two or three months ago about some little money matters, you seemed to think that I had a great many promissory notes and bills of exchange in the hands of different persons: and if I recollect right, I told you at the time that General Beechy, young George Sefton, Paul Dysart, and Colonel Malpas, amongst others, had all asked me to become security for them?"

"I recollect perfectly well the conversation to which your lordship alludes," said Emmerson, who had by this time recovered all his wonted business-like composure, although he perceived plainly enough into what channel the discourse was about to be turned: but he was ready prepared with the tale agreed upon between himself and Editha.

"Now, it struck me at the time," continued the Earl, "that you were rather incredulous when I assured you that I had refused to have anything to do with all those persons."

"I certainly had reason, as I thought," said Emmerson coolly, "to doubt your lordship's word at the time of which we are speaking: inasmuch as at that very moment when you assured me that you had given no acceptances at all, I had in my cash-box several bills bearing your lordship's name, to the tune of five thousand guineas."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl, with a sort of subdued chuckle: for he now fancied that he was once more in the right track to bring all her guilt home to the faithless Editha. "I suppose then, Emmerson, you discovered those bills to be forgeries?" he added inquiringly.

"Yes, my lord, they were forgeries indeed," returned Emmerson; "and it was that scoundrel Malpas who forged them. But I thought that by this time you would have learnt——"

"Malpas forged them!" interrupted the Earl, looking very hard at the bill-broker. "Surely you must mistake? That he placed them in your hands, is one thing: but that he himself perpetrated the forgeries, is another."

"In this very office, my lord," said Emmerson, with increasing effrontery, "did Colonel Malpas, when taxed by me with the forgery, confess his guilt and implore my mercy. Of course I did not wish to send him to the scaffold; and therefore I allowed him to compromise the affair by making a simple debt of it: and for that debt he is now a prisoner in the King's Bench."

"And you therefore gave him up the bills?" said the Earl of Curzon inquiringly.

"How is this, my lord?" ejaculated Emmerson with well-assumed astonishment. "Is it possible that your lordship never received those bills—— But of course you have: otherwise how could you have obtained any knowledge of the matter at all?"

"Now, pray explain yourself, Emmerson," said the Earl, beginning to feel strangely bewildered once more, as if the mystifications of the previous night were to be perpetuated during the day and to follow him from the West End even into the heart of the City.

"The history of the bills is plain and simple enough," returned Emmerson. "I had already endorsed those bills in order to pay them into my banker's hands, when I discovered that they were forgeries. Although willing to avoid instituting a criminal process against Colonel Malpas, and to hush up the matter, I nevertheless thought, on mature reflection, that *you* ought to be informed of it. I accordingly proceeded to Grosvenor Street to see your lordship on the subject. You were not however within: but her ladyship the Countess was at home and disengaged. Time being valuable to me, and not choosing to run the chance of calling three or four times without seeing your lordship, I took the liberty of requesting an interview with her ladyship, to whom I explained all that had occurred. Her ladyship was frightened lest the matter should breed some desperate quarrel between Malpas and your lordship, and end in a duel: she therefore suggested that it would be better to allow some little time to elapse, during which she undertook to seize some favourable opportunity to mention the whole transaction guardedly to your lordship. Well satisfied with this proposition, and acknowledging its prudence, I at once declared my readiness to leave the whole matter in the hands of her ladyship. I had not the bills with me at the time: but immediately on my return to Nicholas Lane, I enclosed them to her ladyship in an envelope marked '*Private.*' And now, my lord, you have the whole history of the transaction."

"Yes," stammered Curzon, scarcely able to conceal his astonishment at this unexpected explanation: "and I must admit that you acted very handsomely in the business."

"I presume that if the Countess of Curzon has not already mentioned the affair to your lordship, it has been for want of a suitable opportunity or else through oversight."

"I suppose it must be so," remarked Curzon, not knowing what to say and scarcely what to think: but still he was as far as ever from entertaining the remotest suspicion that Emmerson had become his wife's paramour.

Taking his leave, he issued forth from the money-lender's office and was about to remount his horse, when he was suddenly accosted by a well-dressed and good-looking young man whose countenance appeared to be familiar to him.

"My lord," said this individual, "will you excuse me for venturing to give your lordship a piece of advice?—but I conjure you to be careful in your dealings with that hypocritical miscreant Emmerson——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl: "the advice is startling, but perhaps well meant. Who are you? I have seen your face before."

"Your lordship has seen me in that very office," was the response: and the young man glanced over his shoulder towards the door of Emmerson's place of business.

"Yes—I recollect you now," exclaimed the Earl: "your name is Varian."

"And if the world has heard of my crimes, it knows little of my misfortunes," said the young man, bitterly. "If I were a culprit who deserved

ANOTHER PORTRAIT OF VENETIA.

transportation, then that villain Emmerson is a man for whom even hanging is too good!"

"We cannot converse here, at Emmerson's very door," said the Earl; "and it is absolutely necessary that I should hear all you may have to unfold concerning your late master. Will you accompany me into some adjacent tavern?"

"No, my lord—not now," answered Varian. "Having received a full pardon, I avail myself of the first leisure moment to come hither and seek an interview with the villain Emmerson in order to tax him with all his infamy and overwhelm him with reproaches. This is the beginning of the deadly revenge which I have sworn to wreak upon that man—a vengeance which will be accomplished by unmasking him to all with whom he has any dealings. Hence the liberty I have taken in accosting your lordship now——"

"Then will you call upon me at my own house, Mr. Varian?" asked the Earl.

"I will, my lord:"—and with these words Theodore turned abruptly away and entered the bill-broker's office.

The Earl of Curzon then mounted his horse, which his groom had been holding at a little distance; and riding back to the West End, he proceeded to Carlton House for the purpose of calling upon Lady Sackville.

CHAPTER XCIX.

ROYALTY'S FAVOURITE

VENETIA, elegantly dressed in a morning *negligée*, was seated upon the sofa with the Prince Regent, in her magnificent saloon at Carlton House.

His Royal Highness was gazing with the mingled ardour and languor of a passion which had been crowned with success, but which was never-

theless subjected to renewed excitement every time he found himself in contact with that woman of transcendent beauty. Thus, while he experienced the voluptuous languor of gratified desires, he at the same time felt the flaming up of fresh longings in his soul. For it was impossible to be sated with the pleasures that were experienced in the arms of Venetia: her beauty was so grand, and at the same time so enchanting—her fascinations were so irresistible as well as so varied—that it was no wonder if she had obtained, in the short period of a few weeks, a more despotic empire than any woman had ever achieved before over the mind of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

Although in reality hating, abhorring, and detesting her lover—despising him as a man, and loathing him as a paramour—she nevertheless dissembled her heart's true feelings with such consummate success, that the Prince actually believed himself to be the object of her devoted affections. And no wonder: for with matchless duplicity she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses; and while she developed all the sensual blandishments of her naturally amorous disposition in order to render herself adorable as *a mistress*, she also studied to render available those qualifications which made her estimable as *a friend*. Thus was it that the Prince was gradually led to consult her in respect to political affairs and State questions; and he could not help observing that she was always prepared to express an opinion and proffer her advice on those points as if they had previously formed the subject of her reflections. Whether her inspiration in these respects came from the intuitive promptings of her own intelligence,—or from the suggestions of her husband—or from any other quarter, we cannot now say: certain it is, however, that the advice which she thus gave was gradually beginning to wield a marked influence upon the Prince—the more so, inasmuch as she always spoke deferentially and not dictatorially, and with the air of a disinterested friend instead of that of a selfish narrow-minded mistress.

On the present occasion, when we find Venetia and the Prince seated together upon the sofa, the conversation had been turning upon certain minor appointments in the civil and diplomatic departments which had to be filled up. A list of the names proposed respectively by the Foreign and Home Secretaries of State, had been submitted to his Royal Highness; and this list now lay upon a table near the sofa.

"Well, my dearest Venetia," said the Prince, "you have not given me your opinion relative to those names—and you know that I value your advice too much not to avail myself of it."

"My dear Prince, you do me honour," answered Venetia, flinging upon his Royal Highness the sweetest smiles, as a Hebe might be supposed to scatter the choicest flowers upon the god of her adoration. "There are about twenty names in that list," she continued, taking up the paper and scanning it deliberately; "and I must confess that I consider some of the proposed appointments injudicious to a degree."

"Can you suggest more suitable ones, Venetia?" asked the Prince, in a careless sort of way, as he toyed with one of her fair hands.

"Let me see," exclaimed the lady, tapping him on the cheek, and then taking his gold pencil-case from his waistcoat-pocket. "Here, my dear George, is the post of First Attaché to the Embassy in Spain about to be offered to Mr. Drummond; whereas Mr. Arthur Fitzherbert should decidedly have the preference."

"Why, he is the cousin by marriage of Mrs. Fitzherbert!" exclaimed the Prince: "and I have told you on three or four occasions already, that I have no reason to be pleased with that lady or with any of her connexions."

"Now, my dear Prince, you are not acting sensibly or justly," said Venetia, turning towards him and placing one of her taper fingers upon his lip as if to prevent him from speaking farther for the moment: then as she poured upon him the golden flood of her radiant looks, she continued to observe, "If you have been enabled so readily to forget—or rather to repent of your ancient connexion with Mrs. Fitzherbert, must I not fear that when wearied of me, you will cease to think of your poor Venetia with love and affection?"

"Never, never—my heart's darling!" cried the Prince, throwing his arms around her neck and drawing her towards him: then, as her superb bosom heaved and swelled against his chest, he said, "Ah! dearest Venetia, there is a great difference between *our* connexion and that which subsisted between me and Mrs. Fitzherbert. You are faithful to me—you will always be faithful: whereas she went to France—intrigued with the Marquis of Bellois—and became a mother by him;—then, on returning to England, she flew back to my arms, vaunting as it were her fidelity towards me—a fidelity in which for a time I was idiot enough to believe! Nor was the French Marquis her only paramour——Oh! I have had many and signal proofs of her scandalous infidelities and depravities! And now, therefore, can you wonder if, notwithstanding the tenderness of my original connexion with Mrs. Fitzherbert, I have been alienated from her for nearly twenty years?"

"All this is no doubt true enough, my dear George," said Venetia, redoubling the apparent ardour of her caresses and lavishing a thousand seeming proofs of tenderness upon her royal paramour, in order the more effectually to rivet the silken bonds and flowery fetters in which her fascinations held his soul captive. "But nevertheless," she continued, "you must not visit upon any of Mrs. Fitzherbert's relations the vindictive sentiments which you may experience towards herself."

"Ah! even if I were inclined to do so, you would take care, my wily charmer, effectually to prevent it;"—and as the Prince thus spoke in a jocular manner, he indulged in delicious toyings and amorous dalliances with his beauteous mistress. "Why, dearest Venetia," he continued, in a languid tone, "there are no less than three or four of Mrs. Fitzherbert's relatives whom you have positively been the means of appointing to excellent posts within the last month."

"And yet, my dear George, you cannot attribute any sinister motives to me," said Venetia, "in having thus persuaded you to perform what I have conceived to be mere acts of justice?"

"Sinister motives!" echoed the Prince. "*Those*, dearest girl, I should never think of attributing to *you!* But really you must have a marvellously refined sense of justice thus to intercede in behalf of the relatives of a lady whom, if she could reconquer her lost influence over me, *you* would have to regard as a rival."

suddenly stifled those syllables of rage and fury to which her lips were on the point of giving utterance. With the excruciating pang which that preterhuman effort caused her, she became deadly pale—and her bosom, a moment before heaving and falling with rapid palpitations, became instantaneously stilled, as if the proudly swelling globes had suddenly changed into that alabaster which they resembled.

"And are you base enough—are you vile enough, to use the means in your power, in order to enforce a response favourable to your wishes?" she asked, her eyes now burning with a lurid light as they were fixed steadfastly upon him.

"If the sacrifice of my soul were at stake," responded the Marquis, "I would not abandon this proceeding of love and vengeance. Ah!" he cried, with a gloating and yet malignant look, "I hate you as much as I adore you! Your beauty ravishes me—enchants me—drives me mad: and I would surrender all hopes of heaven for one hour of bliss and pleasure in your arms! But on the other hand, think you that I have not a vengeance to wreak for that terrible explosion of wrath, fury, and invective which you poured upon me on the occasion when you plunged me into the prisonage of that chair from which I was drivelling idiot enough to release you? Think you that I have forgotten the storm of reproaches—the tempest of upbraidings—which, though sweeping forth from the lips of an angel of beauty, were withering and blighting as if they came from the tongue of a hideous fiend? Oh! now, haughty beauty that you are—cunning intriguer that I have discovered you to be—I will revel in your charms and make my very love my vengeance!"

Venetia remained calm and immoveable as Lord Leveson thus assailed her with all the lashing, scourging power of the language of menace; but still the lurid light shone in her eyes, and it was evident that her composure was of that terrible kind which is produced by utter desperation. At length, when the Marquis had done speaking, her lips wavered for a moment: but no words came forth—they were stifled as it were in her very throat. But suddenly recollecting what she had for the last few minutes forgotten—namely, that Sir Douglas Huntingdon heard all that passed and had promised to rescue her, she experienced an instantaneous buoyancy of the spirit and a brightening up of the countenance: for the thought now struck her that she might not only be saved from the embraces of that loathsome old man, but also revenged upon him for this and other wrongs.

Again there was a wavering of her lips: and this time the words which she meant to speak came forth.

"To-morrow night," she said, in a low deep tone, "at eleven o'clock punctually, I will call at Leveson House. But, my lord, as my reputation is now to be placed completely in your power, may I hope that it will be held sacred?"

"However great a villain a man may be in his endeavours to obtain possession of a woman," answered the Marquis, "he does not usually trumpet forth his success. And as for the revenge which I cherish against you, it will be fully wreaked when you sink a victim into the arms of my consummated desires. Therefore, as a nobleman, as a gentleman, and as a man, I swear by everything solemn and sacred, that the secret of your surrender shall be retained in my breast as inviolably and profoundly as if it reposed only with the dead."

Having thus spoken, the Marquis of Leveson made a low bow—turned abruptly away—and quitted the boudoir.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon now emerged from behind the screen. Venetia, pale—marble pale—with concentrated passion—trembling from head to foot—and with her fair hands firmly clenched, had risen from the sofa and was standing before the looking-glass, surveying herself with evident astonishment at the violence of her own emotions as expressed in her countenance.

"It is not worth while to expend so much splendid indignation upon such a wretch," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, taking her hand, which she now willingly abandoned to him. "To-morrow night you shall go to Leveson House: but I will follow you thither. A few minutes after you have entered, will I present myself at the door and demand admission. If it be refused, I will enforce it: and when once confronted with the Marquis, I will threaten him with the fullest exposure of his conduct towards Ariadne, unless he solemnly undertakes to observe eternal peace and silence with regard to you."

"Now you are indeed my best—my dearest friend," said Venetia, gazing tenderly upon the Baronet.

"Ah! would that I could again induce you to believe that I love you—and you alone?" he murmured, pressing her hand to his lips.

"Yes—I shall esteem your conduct of to-morrow night as a proof of love," observed Venetia, her look now assuming an expression of soft wantonness: "and any reward that you may claim——"

"I understand you, dearest," cried the Baronet joyfully: and flinging his arms around her, he pressed his lips to her's in one long delicious kiss.

A minute afterwards the Baronet quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER CI.

THE GLASS-DOOR.

Passing down the long passage into which opened the various apartments allotted to Lord and Lady Sackville, Sir Douglas Huntingdon reached the principal landing—when it suddenly struck him that as he had not been at Carlton House for nearly ten days, he ought to pay his respects to the Prince, if only for a few moments. For be it recollected that the Baronet was one of George's boon companions; and his Royal Highness, being excessively touchy and remarkably sensitive on certain points, would have felt annoyed on learning that Sir Douglas had been to the palace and quitted it again without seeing him. The Baronet accordingly asked a page who stood on the principal landing, where his Royal Highness was, and how engaged?

"His Royal Highness, sir," was the reply, "not many minutes since passed this way along the passage, towards the saloon at the end; and I believe that his Royal Highness is at this moment alone there."

an immediate interview with your ladyship. His lordship told the footman that he had some business of importance to communicate to your ladyship, and he is now waiting in the drawing-room."

"Ah! I think that I can guess the nature of Lord Leveson's business," observed Venetia, with a look of indescribable vexation, as she turned towards Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "You, my dear friend, who have so recently become acquainted with all my secrets, and who therefore understand my exact position so well,—you, I say, can see at a glance how it is that circumstances have to some extent placed me in the power of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Yes, dearest Venetia," replied the Baronet: "I understand what you mean. But is he not to some extent in my power?—have I not the means of subjecting both himself and his niece to a terrific exposure? Louisa first—Ariadne next—Oh! the villain—if he dare use menaces to coerce you, Venetia, I will defend you—I will protect you—I will save you from his power!"

"Ten thousand thanks, dear friend, for these assurances," exclaimed Venetia, now of her own accord grasping that hand which she had a few minutes previously repulsed. "But shall I see the Marquis?"

"By all means," rejoined the Baronet: "let us at once ascertain what it is that he requires. After all, it is possible that you may be mistaken as to the object of his visit——"

"No, no," interrupted Venetia, impetuously: "I am convinced that it is with no friendly object he has come hither. Persevering and energetic in accomplishing his aims—insatiable in his sensual longings—no sooner has one intended victim escaped from his toils, when he flies in pursuit of another——"

"Then, all things considered," exclaimed the Baronet, "you would do well to receive the Marquis here: and permit me to remain an unseen witness of the interview, either to be near to protect you from present insult, or to learn those particulars that shall guide my actions for your future rescue."

"Be it as you say," rejoined Venetia: then turning to Jessica, she said, "Let the Marquis be conducted hither."

The lady's-maid, who had been permitted to hear the preceding colloquy because she was well acquainted with all the secrets of her mistress, hastily withdrew; and the moment the door had closed, Sir Douglas Huntingdon ensconced himself behind that self-same screen which on a former occasion had served for his hiding-place. Lady Sackville hastened to compose her features and settle herself as it were with a becoming dignity upon the sofa, in order to receive the Marquis of Leveson: and accordingly, in a few minutes, the nobleman was ushered into the boudoir.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he exclaimed, advancing towards Venetia, "to be admitted into the very bower of love and beauty—the mysterious scene of all ineffable fascinations——"

"Was it for the purpose of indulging in this absurd rhapsody, that your lordship sent so pressing a demand for an audience?"—and as Venetia thus spoke, with a quiet sarcasm in her accents and a subdued contemptuousness in her looks, she rose from the sofa as much as to imply that she wished the interview to be already at an end.

"Your ladyship is severe—too severe," observed the Marquis, with a malignant glance, which seemed to infer that the hour of his triumph was drawing near: then with a low bow he asked, "Is it your ladyship's pleasure that I should remain standing?"

"Oh! assuredly not," exclaimed Venetia, with a glance which seemed to fling back the defiance of his lordship's looks. "Pray be seated:" and she herself resumed her place upon the sofa.

The Marquis fixed his eyes steadily upon Lady Sackville; and as with one comprehensive look he embraced all the transcending charms of this woman of matchless beauty, he thought within himself that no daring was too desperate and no measure too extreme for adoption on the part of one who would seek to gain that glorious prize!

"It is scarcely necessary for me to observe," he said after a pause, during which Venetia made a very evident gesture of impatience not unmingled with disgust at finding herself thus the object of his lustfully gloating looks: "it is scarcely necessary for me to observe," he said, "that I have too many reasons to fear that I am no special favourite with your ladyship—and yet I am one of your ladyship's most enthusiastic admirers."

"Your admiration, my lord, considering all that has taken place," she replied, with a deeply meaning look, "is little flattering to me."

"It is true, my dear Lady Sackville," he continued, totally unabashed, "that when inveigled into one of my mechanical chairs, you well nigh paid the penalty of that curiosity which led you to penetrate into those private apartments——"

"Dare you allude to those chambers of infamy?" ejaculated Venetia, her eyes flashing fire. "But, Ah! my lord, I could have forgiven you for all that you thus attempted towards me: but when I think of how nearly that innocent girl——"

"I understand full well what you mean," interrupted Lord Leveson, with another malignant look: "and it is precisely because I *do* thus understand you, that I have taken it into my head to call upon your ladyship at the present moment. Of course, having been to Stratton Street, I am well aware——"

"We need not repeat things which are mutually known," suddenly interrupted Venetia. "Indeed, I am anxious that this interview should be cut as short as possible. State therefore the business that has brought you hither——"

"The explanation shall be given as curtly—and and I may almost add as imperiously—as it is demanded," replied Lord Leveson.

"Speak, then!" ejaculated Venetia: "and trifle not with my time, which appears to be more precious than your's. What is the nature of your business?"

The Marquis fixed his eyes with the steadiness of a firm resolution upon the glowing countenance of Venetia, who was now truly grand—truly magnificent in her haughty indignation: and in a slow, measured, and determined tone, he said, "My business here is to demand when it will suit Lady Sackville either to admit me to her boudoir as the partner of her couch, or to pass the night with me at Leveson House?"

A torrent of bitter reproaches and terrible invectives rose to the very tip of Venetia's tongue, as these words, so tremendously insulting, met her ear: but with an effort of surpassing energy, she

was therefore ignorant of the circumstance of Ariadne's restoration to life, which indeed had only taken place a couple of days previous to the one whereof we are now writing: and we should observe that the interest and the gold of the Marquis of Leveson had succeeded in keeping the circumstance out of the newspapers of the day.

"You must have thought that something fatal had happened to me," observed the Baronet, as he entered the boudoir: "that is to say, if you condescended to devote a moment's thought to me at all?"

"My dear Douglas," said Venetia, motioning him to take a seat upon the sofa by her side, "you are aware that whatever my failings may be, a ridiculous affectation, is not one of them: and therefore I will candidly confess that I *have* been both surprised and grieved to think that you have allowed nine or ten days to pass without coming near me."

"Ah! do not chide me, dear Venetia," said the Baronet, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips. "You are aware that I have had much to annoy me—much to occupy my attention——"

"Your mansion was burnt down," observed Venetia; "and that was certainly enough to cause you much vexation. But you are rich—and the loss can soon be repaired. Wherefore, then, seem so dull—so melancholy—so pensive? It is not natural ——Ah! I understand you now," she abruptly exclaimed, withdrawing her hand as suddenly: "the death of that poor girl whom you picked up at Shooter's Hill, has affected you more than you choose to admit."

"You will be surprised, Venetia," said the Baronet, "to learn that the poor girl, of whom you speak, is not dead after all."

"What mean you?" cried Venetia, gazing upon the Baronet with unfeigned wonder. "Did you not tell me that she was no more—that she had died through the brutality of the Marquis of Leveson——"

"'Tis an amazing and extraordinary history altogether," interrupted the Baronet. "In a word, Ariadne Varian was plunged into a profound trance, from which she was miraculously awakened the day before yesterday."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon then proceeded to recite those particulars connected with the damsel's resuscitation, which are already known to the reader, and which were fraught with so wild, so romantic, and yet so deep an interest.

"And where is Miss Varian now?" asked Venetia, profoundly amazed at all that she had just heard.

"She was last evening removed," answered the Baronet, "under the care of my housekeeper Mrs. Baines, to apartments which have been taken for the purpose in a secluded and quiet neighbourhood. It was at first thought requisite to allow her to remain for a few days at Leveson House: but the indignity she had endured beneath that roof and the horrors to which that outrage had led, produced such an effect upon her mind that the physicians were compelled to consent to her removal thus speedily. Her brother is with her in her new abode ——"

"And doubtless Sir Douglas Huntingdon will be a constant visitor there?" interrupted Venetia, with a slight movement indicative of annoyance, and with a look that was the least thing piqued and pouting.

"Ah! 'tis cruel thus to suspect the fidelity of a heart devoted to your charms!" exclaimed the Baronet, sinking upon his knees at Venetia's feet. "But I will confess that this strange episode of which Ariadne Varian is the heroine, has produced a singular—and indeed unpleasant effect upon my mind: it has unsettled me—it has thrown a damp as it were upon my spirits—it has rendered me restless and uneasy ——"

"My dear Douglas," observed Venetia, the colour mounting to her cheeks, as she bent her beauteous head towards the Baronet, who knelt at her feet,—"you are in love with that girl—and you are now, with wonderful ingenuousness, confessing to me all the minute symptoms of your passion!"

"No, Venetia—no!" exclaimed Sir Douglas starting from his knees and resuming his place by her side upon the sofa. "Even if I may have fancied so for a moment, it was but a dream. Indeed, I experienced a boundless compassion—an illimitable sympathy—for that poor girl, who saved my life at the murderers' hut, and whom circumstances thus so singularly placed in my care."

"I tell you, Douglas," interrupted Venetia, gently repulsing his hand as he attempted to take her's,—"I tell you that you love Ariadne Varian! And why should you not? If she be beautiful, and amiable, and good, she is doubtless worthy of your affection——"

"What? the sister of a poor clerk!" ejaculated the Baronet: "and he a man whom the law has branded and whom society will ever regard as an outcast—although the royal prerogative, influenced by your goodness, has pardoned him!"

"But are not you the master of your own actions?" inquired Venetia, bending down her eyes: "and may you not, if you choose, marry this girl, obscure and humble though she be? As for her brother's unhappy position—wherefore should she suffer for *his* errors?"

"Oh! it is useless thus to argue the point, Venetia," cried Sir Douglas Huntingdon, somewhat impatiently: "for I tell you that I love not Ariadne Varian!"

"And I, who perhaps know the human heart better than you," returned Venetia, "in spite of all your worldly experience—I tell you, I say, that you *do* love her, and in the recesses of your soul there is at this moment a voice which echoes the assertion I have just made! Now, my dear Douglas," she observed, looking suddenly up with a kind and amiable expression, of countenance, "the feeling that must henceforth subsist between you and me, is friendship—and nothing more!"

"Ah! cruel Venetia," exclaimed the Baronet: "have you not given me other hopes?—have you not filled my heart with the paradise of blissful expectations?—and now will you render that heart a desert?"

"No—believe me, dear Douglas," rejoined Venetia, with an amiable smile, "your heart will not be a desert—for it will be filled with the image of Ariadne Varian!"

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was about to make some reply, and urge the assurance that the image of Venetia alone occupied his heart, when Jessica again made her appearance in the boudoir.

"The Marquis of Leveson," she said, "requests

"Not so, my dear George," exclaimed Venetia, with one of her sweetest smiles: "for if I mistake not, Mrs. Fitzherbert is now nearly sixty."

"True!" ejaculated the Prince; "and the twenty years, which have elapsed since last I saw her have no doubt made a wonderful alteration in her, person. But tell me candidly, dear Venetia, do you know her?"

"You have already asked me this question three or four times," responded Lady Sackville, tapping his cheek playfully: "and I have as frequently assured you that I have never even seen Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"But has she not written to solicit your good offices on behalf of her pauper relatives?" asked the Prince.

"No—on my honour she has not," replied Venetia, in a firm tone and with decisive look.

"Then it is really through kind and generous motives that you thus interest yourself in the matter?" observed his Royal Highness, interrogatively.

Again Venetia gave an emphatic answer in the affirmative.

"Well, you syren-charmer," said the Prince, completely yielding to the blandishments, the seductive wiles, and the irresistible fascinations to which he was subjected not merely in the society but from the close contact of that woman of transcendent beauty,—"you must have your own way in all things! Therefore, as I hate being troubled with those official lists, do you take the pencil and make what alterations therein you may think fit. I will at once affix my initials; and then the paper can go back to the Minister. So do this at once, Venetia: and then, instead of talking any more on business, which you know I hate, we will converse on the power, the influence, and the delights of love!"

"The most delicious of topics!" exclaimed Venetia, flinging a glance full of voluptuous tenderness upon the Prince: then gliding away from his side for a few moments, she sate down on a chair at the table and made several erasures and alterations in the list of names.

"Now for my initials," said the Prince, also rising from the sofa and stooping over Venetia's shoulder when he observed her lay down the pencil-case: then seating himself by her side, he was about to sign the document, when his looks settled upon a particular name that figured therein. "Hey-dey!" he cried: "what is Captain Bathurst doing in this list?"

"I should have thought," said Venetia, with a charming smile of mingled deprecation and persuasion, "that the brother of your old friend, Miss Bathurst of Stratton Street, might have some little claim upon your royal notice——"

"But for years past, my beloved Venetia," exclaimed the Prince, "I have positively refused to do any more for that Bathurst family—always, as a matter of course, excepting Horace—your complaisant husband, dear Venetia," he added with a smile.

"Do not for a moment think that Horace has instigated me," exclaimed Lady Sackville, "to become the means of providing for his relatives or connexions. I do this of my own accord, and simply because I consider——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Prince: "you and I will not quarrel about trifles—and therefore you shall have your own way."

With these words his Royal Highness affixed his initials to the document; and this being done, the Prince and his lovely mistress continued to discourse for the next hour upon an infinite variety of pleasing nothings and charming trifles, which however the sprightliness of Venetia invested with ineffable attractions. At the end of the hour the Prince was compelled to leave her in order to assist at some ceremony connected with his high office; and Venetia retired to her boudoir.

Scarcely had she reached that chamber—so elegantly and at the same time so tastefully fitted up, and seeming in every way so well adapted for the mysteries of love,—when Jessica entered to announce that the Earl of Curzon requested an immediate interview with her ladyship.

"Ah! he is returned then from France," murmured Venetia to herself; and she immediately ordered Jessica to hasten and introduce the nobleman to the boudoir.

For upwards of half-an-hour did the Earl of Curzon remain alone with Venetia in earnest conversation: but relative to the nature of their discourse we need not at present offer any explanations. Suffice it to say, that it was no topic of tenderness or love which thus engaged their profound attention: and although, when rising to depart, the Earl ventured to breathe his hopes that the night of bliss which he had spent in that boudoir was not destined to be the only one, Venetia gave him but a few hurried and vague though apparently tender assurances; and Curzon, snatching a kiss from her delicious lips, took his leave of the beauteous creature.

On being again left alone, Lady Sackville sate down to pen a long letter; and scarcely had she concluded it when Jessica once more entered to announce a visitor. This time it was Sir Douglas Huntingdon; and Venetia at once desired the Baronet to be admitted to her presence.

CHAPTER C.

THE BARONET.—THE MARQUIS.

THE reader will be pleased to remember that Sir Douglas Huntingdon had obtained the pardon of Theodore Varian through the medium of Lady Sackville. On the occasion when he called upon her for this purpose, he had explained all his adventures at Shooter's Hill—everything that regarded Ariadne—concluding with the description of this young damsel's death. The reader will likewise recollect that Venetia had listened to him with a glitter of something like jealous uneasiness in her eyes; but that when she found the Baronet speaking of Ariadne only as an object of compassion, Venetia's countenance brightened up. Lastly, it must be remembered that when he described Ariadne's *death*—as the trance was then supposed to be—Venetia had murmured to herself a few words expressive of a wish that the day of retribution might sooner or later overtake the Marquis of Leveson.

More than a week had now elapsed since that interview between Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon; and during this interval the Baronet had not called again at Carlton House. Venetia

"Then I will seek him in that apartment," said the Baronet: and turning upon his heel he proceeded along the passage.

The page offered no farther remark, much less any remonstrance, as he knew that Sir Douglas was not only most intimate with the Prince, but enjoyed, so to speak, the "run of the palace."

At the end of the long passage was the ante-chamber with the glass door at which Sir Douglas and Venetia had first exchanged tender looks, on on that special occasion when the Prince diverted himself with certain young and nobly-born ladies in the magnificent saloon with which that glass-door communicated. Traversing the ante-chamber, the Baronet at once entered the saloon, which, as we have before stated, was furnished in the most luxurious style, and was decorated by numerous chaudeliers and lamps.

Closing behind him the glass-door with the crimson blinds, Sir Douglas looked around in expectation of beholding his Royal Highness: but the Prince was not there. Indeed, the Baronet saw no one: and he was about to retreat, when he noticed that a side-door stood open. His acquaintance with Carlton House was so intimate that he knew full well that this door was a secret one communicating with a staircase having a private outlet towards the park: and indeed the Baronet himself had frequently been present at scenes in the magnificent saloon to which that convenient mode of communication had furnished the accessories of frail female beauty.

Seeing, therefore, this little door now standing open, the Baronet immediately felt assured that some pleasant diversion or intrigue was in progress; and for a moment he felt disposed to wait and see whether he should be "one too many" in the expected pastime. But recent events had somewhat steadied his character and sobered his inclinations; and on second thoughts he resolved to retreat from the danger of being lured into some scene of licentiousness or debauch. He accordingly withdrew, closing the glass-door with the crimson blinds. But obedient to some sudden impulse of curiosity, he lingered for a moment to peep back into the saloon just to see whether the Prince was returning. At that same instant the figure of a man emerged from the secret doorway on the opposite side of the saloon; and to his unspeakable amazement, Sir Douglas Huntingdon instantaneously recognised the man whom he had first encountered at the *Jolly Waggoner's*, and whom Nell Gibson had afterwards described to him as being the Public Executioner!

So stupified was Sir Douglas Huntingdon on observing this man in Carlton House, that he was transfixed as it were to the spot,—his looks still plunging through the glass-door into the saloon. Immediately behind the Hangman followed the Prince,—his Royal Highness having lingered for a few moments in the rear to fasten the door at the foot of the staircase, which had a secret spring known only to himself and a few of his most intimate friends, male and female.

Mr. Daniel Coffin was not only attired in his Sunday's best, but had evidently endeavoured to make himself look as smart and as respectable as possible. Nevertheless nothing could materially mitigate the hang-dog expression of his countenance; and the Baronet could perceive that the Prince, though endeavouring to maintain an air of dignified hauteur, was profoundly disgusted at being in the company of such a man.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was determined, if possible, to ascertain what earthly business the Prince Regent of the Kingdom could have to transact with the Public Executioner. The liveliest curiosity had seized upon the Baronet; and at any risk of discovery as an eaves-dropper, was he resolved to gratify it. Seeing by the manner in which the Prince stopped short in the middle of the saloon and leant against a chair, that he intended to hold his interview with the Hangman in that apartment, Sir Douglas kept his post at the glass-door, through which he could obtain a view of all that passed: and by cautiously and gently opening it the least possible distance, he was enabled to overhear the greater portion of the conversation which transpired.

"Now, my man," said the Prince, "be so good as to tell me at once what it is you want with me. I received—with how much astonishment I leave you to guess—the precious specimen of orthography and penmanship which you sent me, begging this interview——"

"Yes—and I received too the private message your Royal Highness sent by a gentleman in plain clothes," observed the Hangman; "and I felt very much obliged at being told that I might come here on this day and at this hour, to have the honour of talking to your Highness——"

"Well, now you are here," observed the Prince, with ill-concealed impatience: "and the sooner you explain your business the better."

"If your Royal Highness means me to speak in such a hurry," observed Coffin, "I shall be so flurried——"

"Well, take your own time, then," exclaimed the Prince, throwing himself in the chair upon the back of which he had been leaning; "and I will listen to you as patiently as I can."

"Well, my lord—I mean Royal Highness—you must let me go back to the beginning," resumed the Hangman. "You know that day when you and Lady Ernestina Dysart found me locked fast in that queer-fashioned chair at Leveson House; and then your Royal Highness told me that if I would help you and her ladyship in the scheme you had in hand to get rid of Mr. Dysart, you would give me a couple of hundred guineas. Of course I snapped at the bargain. Two hundred guineas wasn't to be sneezed at; and then, too, you promised that the Sheriff should be empowered to offer a free pardon to any man who would accept the office of Jack Ketch. All this suited me uncommon well; and on the day of execution I transmogrified myself into a black fellow, so as to mix unknown and unrecognized in the crowd. All went on right enough: the Sheriff made the proclamation—and I volunteered. My eyes! what a shout the people gave!—how frightened they was of being baulked of the hanging-show!—and I dare say they felt uncommon grateful to the blessed institutions of this country that always ensure them Kings, or Prince Regents, or Queens, that are fond of sending their subjects to be tucked up like dogs."

"Spare your comments, fellow," interrupted the Prince, sternly; "and proceed with what you have to say—though for the life of me I cannot understand why you are recapitulating all these incidents."

"Well, my lord — I mean Royal Highness," again resumed Coffin, not exactly heeding the last comment of the Prince: "when once reinstated in my pleasant office of Public Executioner, I went into Dysart's cell and helped your's and Lady Ernestina's scheme most admirably. I plummed Dysart that I had seen the reprieve—heard it read—and had particularly marked the private instructions which directed that it was not to be produced until the very moment the drop was ready to fall. In fact, I did what you told me—which was to buoy him up with hope until the very last, so as not to allow any suspicion to enter his mind or any misgiving to excite a vindictive feeling. So you may thank me, my lord—I mean Royal Highness—and Lady Ernestina too may thank me for amusing Dysart's mind in such a way that he did not see through the trick at the very last and blurt forth to the sheriffs or the chaplain all about your Royal Highness's amour with his wife and about the written document you so solemnly signed. For even if you had not told the Home Secretary, as I suppose you did, to write an official letter to the Sheriff of London about preventing *last dying speeches* on the scaffold, I should have been able to have managed the business all pleasant enough for you, and have cased Dysart's journey out of the world as comfortably as possible."

"Now I conceive you must have brought your long narrative to a conclusion," said the Prince, "and perhaps you will tell me why you have entered into all these particulars——"

"Just to show your Royal Highness how faithfully I behaved," responded the Hangman, with a tone and manner of coarse effrontery, "and how well I followed out all your instructions."

"I do not deny it," observed the Prince, to whom it was gall and wormwood to permit the prolongation of the interview: "but did I not remit you the two hundred guineas which I promised, by the hands of a confidential valet—the same who called upon you yesterday?"

"There's no denying that the two hundred guineas came safe enough," returned the Hangman, "but on mature reflection, I can't help thinking my services were but indifferently paid. If it had been a commoner or even a lord who had employed me, well and good: but for a Royal Highness—a Prince Regent—almost a King and Defender of the Faith into the bargain, as the inscription on the money says—to give such a paltry fee as two hundred guineas——"

"You scoundrel," exclaimed the Prince, now goaded to an intolerable degree of excruciation, "how dare you thus pollute all the sacred names of Royalty?"

"I have no doubt," observed the Hangman, his own effrontery becoming all the more coolly determined and doggedly resolute in proportion as he perceived that the Prince grew excited—because in his heart, like the millions of the people, he had a natural and bitter hatred against everything belonging to Monarchy and Royalty,—"I have no doubt," he said, "that you think I am precious free and precious impudent: but it matters deuced little to me what you do think. Perhaps you will tell me I am a thief? I should very soon answer that you, who wring the last farthing out of the people in the shape of taxation to support your luxuries and debaucheries, are quite as much a robber in your way——"

"Enough of this," cried the Prince, deeply humiliated and bitterly repenting the day when he placed himself in the power of such a diabolical ruffian. "What is it you require of me—what do want?"

"Well," returned the Hangman, unable to resist the opportunity for another jest, "I might in reason ask your Royal Highness to create me a Duke or a Marquis—for there's many a man quite as bad as I am raised to the Peerage for doing the dirty work of Royalty. But my tastes don't exactly go that way. I like money better than titles——"

"Ah! then you want money?" said the Prince, eagerly catching at the means of getting rid of this dreadful visitor.

"Well, I should have thought you might long ago have guessed this much. The fact is," continued Coffin, "I am going to scrape together as much money as I possibly can get, for the purpose of emigrating to America——"

"Oh! then I shall cheerfully assist you," exclaimed the Prince, the sudden relief which this announcement gave him, producing an expression of joy upon his features. "How much do you require?"

"Well, I don't think your Royal Highness could expect me to do with less than five hundred guineas——"

"You shall have that amount," said the Prince: "but I cannot give it you now. In a few days you may rely upon receiving it. But how is it to be conveyed to you? I cannot send my valet to your residence any more: it compromises me too much in his eyes. Nor can I allow you to come hither again: the risk of your being observed is too great——"

"Well, if your Royal Highness will only tell me the when, the where, and the how," said the Hangman, "I will be punctual."

"I have it!" exclaimed the Prince; "an idea has struck me! Lady Ernestina Dysart is so deeply mixed up in this business, that she must help me in it."

"Ah! to be sure," observed Coffin: "your Royal Highness can send her to meet me somewhere and hand me over the money."

"This day week—at eleven o'clock at night—and on Westminster Bridge," said the Prince Regent. "Be that the appointment."

"Well and good," rejoined the Hangman. "But to make it more definite, suppose we say that Lady Ernestina, or whoever you may send, will find me seated in the recess over the middle arch, on the left-hand side of the bridge as you cross it."

"It is a bargain," observed the Prince. "And now you may leave me."

Daniel Coffin accordingly retired by the private staircase, the Prince following him to unfasten the door at the bottom.

We need hardly inform our readers that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was so astounded — so amazed—by all he had just heard, that he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. If he had occasionally failed to catch a few words here and there, in the preceding colloquy, he had nevertheless heard the greater portion,—enough indeed to make the whole tremendous episode in the Prince's career perfectly plain to his compre-

hension. That his Royal Highness should have so deeply committed himself with such a man as Daniel Coffin, was more than enough to confound the Baronet and stagger his belief. Indeed, as he moved slowly away from the glass-door at the conclusion of the scene, he asked himself, "Is this a reality, or is it a vision?—am I awake, or walking in my sleep?"

Quitting the ante-chamber, threading the long passage, and crossing the landing once more, the Baronet wended his way back to Venetia's boudoir—on entering which, he found her alone, reclining on the sofa and wrapped in profound meditation

"I have returned," said the Baronet, "simply because I may have an alteration to make in our proceedings of to morrow night. Something has occurred which is suggestive of a change of tactics, placing indeed the principal inmates of Leveson House more completely in my power than ever. But I shall not now trouble you with expalantions, Venetia: suffice it for you to know that you shall not only baffle the Marquis, but likewise behold him so deeply humiliated that he shall throw himself at your feet in an agony of terror—a grovelling, servile, miserable wretch!"

"Oh! if you can accomplish all this," exclaimed Venetia, her countenance, a few moments before so pensive, now lighting up with joy,—"you know not how happy you will render me, and how deeply, deeply grateful I shall prove."

"Fear not, dear Venetia," responded the Baronet, "that I shall fail in accomplishing all I promise. Indeed," he added, with a look of profound and tender meaning, "the reward held out is sufficient to excite me to even superhuman exertions in your cause."

"And that reward sha'l not be withheld," murmured Venetia, bending down her blushing countenance.

The compact was sealed with a fond embrace; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon took his departure.

CHAPTER CII.

THE ROYAL BROTHER AND SISTER.

About an hour after the occurrences just related the Prince Regent received a pressing note from his sister the Princess Sophia, begging that he would call upon her as soon as possible. Her Royal Highness occupied apartments in St. James's Palace; and thither the Prince accordingly repaired.

We have stated in a preceding chapter that the Princess Sophia was now about thirty-eight years of age—of luxuriant embonpoint, and of very handsome countenance. But the traces of deep care were visible upon her features; and without rising from her chair in the elegant apartment where she received her brother, the royal lady bade him in a languid tone place himself near her, as she wished to consult him on a matter of the utmost importance.

The ladies who were in attendance upon the Princess, had withdrawn in obedience to a sign which she made on the entrance of her brother; and this circumstance, together with the deep melancholy which appeared in Sophia's manner, and the look of mingled mystery and hesitation with which she regarded him, proved that it was indeed some affair of more than usual importance that had induced her thus to send for him.

"Has anything unpleasant occurred?" asked the Prince, who was conscious of so many misdeeds of his own and so many errors and frailties on the part of every member of his family, that he was always apprehensive of detection, exposure, or retribution.

"Nothing has occurred that need give *you* any particular annoyance," replied the Princess: then after a few moments' pause, during which the colour went and came upon her cheeks even under the artificial bloom which a cosmetic shed thereon, she continued to observe, "The advice which I seek at your hands, especially regards my own happiness."

"And yet you seem afraid of speaking outright," remarked the Prince, somewhat impatiently.

"Yes," said the Princess Sophia, her eyes filling with tears; "because it is a painful thing for a sister to speak to a brother of her frailty and her shame."

"For heaven's sake explain yourself!" exclaimed the Prince, starting uneasily, and then fixing a penetrating look upon his sister. "Would you have me understand that you have *again* formed some connexion which is likely to threaten you with disgrace and dishonour?"

"No, no!" returned the Princess, hastily and almost indignantly. "It is concerning the secret of my early years that I would speak to you—a secret that has so long been known to you——"

"Yes—the affair in the Edgeware Road," interrupted the Prince. "But what danger threatens to transpire therefrom? Lady Florimel surely has not betrayed you?"

"Lady Florimel is the most admirable of women," exclaimed the Princess; "and I believe that she would die to serve me. It is not my secret that is menaced, but my happiness that is deeply, deeply compromised—that is to say, such little happiness as circumstances have permitted me to retain from the wreck of all the generous feelings, fervid affections, and buoyant hopes of youth."

"And so long as your secret is safe," observed the Prince, somewhat disgusted with the sentimentalism now exhibited by his sister, "why the devil should you be unhappy?"

"Unhappy!" she echoed, with a bitter laugh. "Should I not be something less or something more than woman, were I really and truly happy? Or think you, George, that I can possibly blind myself to the fact that our family—the Royal Family of England—is rapidly becoming an object of loathing, hatred, and scorn to the great masses of the community? Is it not said openly, that our unhappy sire has gone mad through remorse at his own crimes and anguish at the misdeeds of his children? Has it not been even more than hinted that our brother Ernest was the murderer of Sellis? And you will excuse me for reminding you, my dear George, that the press has been recently more busy than ever with *your* name——"

"A truce to all this recapitulation of evils!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, suddenly. "You are in a melancholy mood, Sophia—your spirits are depressed—and therefore you are giving way to the gloomiest forebodings. Was it to entertain me with your miseries and make me as miserable as yourself, that you have sent for me hither?"

"How unkind of you to speak thus!" cried the unhappy Princess, bursting into tears: for the conduct of her brother on the present occasion seemed more than usually heartless, especially as she herself was more than ever in need of affectionate sympathy.

"Well, well," said the Prince, somewhat softening towards his sister; "tell me what advice you seek at my hands, or what service you require of me."

"Listen to me patiently for a few minutes, and you will then understand wherefore I am thus unhappy," said the Princess, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You are aware, dear George," she continued, with looks slightly averted—as if she dared not meet his gaze while touching upon the present topic,—"you are aware that upwards of nineteen years have now elapsed since I became a mother. The babe was entrusted to a surgeon of the name of Thurston—the same who has since risen to such eminence and acquired so great a renown as a physician. About two months ago, yielding to an irresistible impulse, I called upon Lady Florimel and besought her to institute inquiries relative to the fate of that son whom from its very birth I had thus abandoned to the care of strangers. My dear friend Pauline at once undertook the commission; and she called upon Doctor Thurston, from whose lips she learnt that the child had been stolen in its infancy. Indeed, it was in the month of June, 1795, when the child was between five and six months old, that it was thus stolen from the arms of its nurse in Hyde Park. Doctor Thurston knows that the child was mine—has known it indeed for a very long time: but he has kept the secret inviolable. His honesty—his integrity—in this respect, at once convinced Pauline that he was telling the truth when he stated that the child had been stolen. Moreover, he showed her a printed hand-bill which was circulated at the

time, bearing the date I just now mentioned, and offering a reward for the recovery of the child. Lady Florimel was, as you may suppose, profoundly grieved for my sake on hearing such terrible intelligence from Doctor Thurston: but she nevertheless deemed it her duty to report the whole truth to me. What my feelings have since been I shall not attempt to describe: suffice it to say that while picturing the most horrible destinies for the unhappy progeny of my youthful weakness, I have looked upon myself as the most unnatural of mothers! But in the mean time—since that interview between Lady Florimel and Doctor Thurston—the head officer of Bow Street has been employed by the physician to discover if possible some trace of the lost one——"

"Ah! Lawrence Sampson," ejaculated the Prince. "He is a clever fellow. But I hope that Thurston did not entrust him with your secret?"

"No," said the Princess: "Doctor Thurston represented that it was his own child who had been lost. And this Mr. Sampson has succeeded not only in discovering that the lost one is alive, but also where he is and the manner he has been brought up."

Here the Princess Sophia burst into a flood of tears; and her voice was choked with the convulsive sobs that rent her bosom.

"Where is the boy?" inquired the Prince; "and in what sphere of life has he been trained? I am afraid that you have nothing very satisfactory to impart on this point——"

"Good heavens! what a dreadful idea is it for a mother to contemplate!" exclaimed the Princess, wringing her hands in bitterest anguish; but suddenly regaining the fortitude of despair, she dashed the tears from her eyes, and turning her looks steadfastly upon her brother, said in a deep and solemn tone, "My son—the offspring of my early crime—has been trained amongst the vilest of the vile—dragged through all the mire, feculence, and corruption of demoralization—inured to depravity—steeped to the very crown of his head in all moral abominations—and now—O God! that a mother's tongue should have to proclaim so hideous a fact!—and now, I say, he is in the service of a man who occupies the basest, the most loathed, scorned, and abhorred position that is to be found at the bottom of the social scale——"

"To whom do you allude?" demanded the Prince, who in spite of his intense selfishness and his cold-blooded indifference to the sorrows of others, could not help being somewhat touched by the spectacle of his sister's dread despair, as likewise by the appalling interest that belonged to this narrative which she was reciting:—"who is the man that you thus speak of as being the master or employer of the lad?"

The Princess Sophia turned upon her brother a look full of unutterable misery, as she said in a low and scarcely audible tone, "Who is that man?—it is the Public Executioner!"

"What, Daniel Coffin!" ejaculated the Prince, the mention of the dreadful man appearing ominous to a degree, inasmuch as but little more than an hour had elapsed since he and his Royal Highness had stood face to face in the splendid saloon at Carlton House. "This fellow now seems destined to spring up frequently in my path," thought the Prince within himself: and the feelings of disgust, annoyance, and even alarm which he thus experienced, were reflected in his countenance.

"Oh! you may well be horrified and terror-stricken!" exclaimed the Princess, not altogether comprehending the spring of her brother's emotions; for she was of course utterly unaware of the fact that the Common Hangman was personally known to the Prince Regent of the Kingdom.

"But what do you propose to do in the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness: "or what do you wish or expect that I should do for you?"

"Hear me out—and then you will understand wherefore I have sent for you. For nearly two months," continued the Princess, "has Doctor Thurston been aware that the unfortunate youth is alive and in the service of that dreadful man: but not until yesterday had the physician the courage to communicate to Lady Florimel the result of Mr. Lawrence Sampson's researches. Indeed, it was only when Pauline threatened to call personally upon the Bow Street officer and ascertain whether anything was being done in the matter—it was only then, I say, that Doctor Thurston admitted that Sampson's efforts had already been crowned—too fatally crowned—with success. And now, it would also appear that by a singular coincidence Mr. Sampson, *before* being engaged in that research at all, had fallen in with the youth—had conceived an interest in his behalf—had invited him to his house—and had done all he could to reclaim him from the ways of vice. But although the endeavour seemed to prosper for a few days, those favourable symtoms speedily disappeared; and alas! the youth returned to his old companions, and no doubt to his old habits. All these things did Lady Florimel succeed in gleaning—or rather extorting—from Doctor Thurston's lips yesterday: and this day has she revealed them to me!"

"Then if the youth is so inveterate in his bad habits," observed the Prince, "the best thing will be to leave him where he is."

"How can you recommend such a course?" cried the Princess, in a voice of bitter remonstrance.

"How could you have abandoned him for more than nineteen years?" demanded the Prince coolly.

"Oh! now I am indeed righteously rewarded for my unnatural conduct!"—and as the Princess thus spoke in a voice of rending anguish, she again burst into a flood of tears, at the first outpouring of which her brother made a movement of impatience. "Unnatural mother that I have been," she continued, after a long pause: "most richly, richly do I deserve every reproach—every taunt—every imputation, that can be thrown against me! Nevertheless, it is cruel indeed to receive this chastisement at the hands of a brother!"

"Well, perhaps I was a little harsh," said the Prince Regent: "but do pray tell me at once and without any farther circumlocution, what I can do for you—what you require at my hands?"

"Of all my brothers, *you* only," said the Princess, "are acquainted with my secret: and therefore, in the first place, it was natural I should confide to your ears all that I have learnt concerning my boy. In the second place, you alone—as Prince Regent—have the power to snatch that unhappy youth away from the career of degradation and depravity which he is pursuing——"

"Sophia!" exclaimed the Prince, bending a stern look upon his sister,—"am I to understand that you propose to place this youth about your person—to have him near you—and make him aware of the secret of his birth?'

"I mean nothing of all this," returned the Princess. "But I wish him to be rescued from that den of infamy where he now is, and to be placed in some honourable position: I wish him to be removed from that grade of life where he is constantly liable to be either tempted or necessitated to do evil! In a word, I wish that he may have a chance and opportunity given him to retrieve his character and to become an honest member of society."

"But how, in the devil's name," cried the Prince impatiently, "am I to accomplish all this? Would you have me send for him—tell him I have heard of his merits—and at once appoint him to the post of valet in my household? Such an idea is ridiculous: he would be coming to my bed-chamber in the middle of the night to cut my throat——"

"Cruel—heartless brother!" shrieked forth the Princess Sophia: "you are speaking of my own son!'

"And a pretty son, it seems by all accounts, you have allowed him to grow up," retorted the Prince, brutally. "Come, come—let us have no more whining, crying, and whimpering on this point. What you have permitted the boy to become, so he must remain."

"Never!" ejaculated the Princess, starting from her seat and flinging glances of fiery indignation upon the Prince Regent. "No—by heaven!" she exclaimed: "I will sooner peril discovery and run the risk of disgrace, than allow that boy to remain in the vile companionship to which he has been too long abandoned! My conduct as a mother has been execrable to a degree; and I swear that some atonement shall be made now! Assist me if you will: and if not, then disguised in humble apparel, I will myself visit the abode of infamy and horror where that poor boy now dwells!"

"You are mad, Sophia—you are mad!" exclaimed the Prince, in mingled anger and alarm. "Such a proceeding on your part would be attended with the most serious risks: indeed, discovery would be almost inevitable—and if you are once in the power of such a desperate villain as the Public Executioner," he added bitterly, "God help you!"

"Then, George—dear George," said the Princess, the excitement of anger suddenly experiencing a complete reaction as she saw the truth of her brother's reasoning—although she little conjectured how *feelingly* he spoke relative to the Hangman,—"pray assist me to save this boy from utter, utter ruin! Succour me to rescue him ere it be too late! Conceive—only fancy the horror—the ineffable, illimitable horror—that would seize upon my soul were he to be drawn into some crime that would send him to the scaffold! Oh! if my feelings now prompt me to extend a helping hand towards him, what would they do in such a case as that?—should I not be goaded by desperation to dare everything—exposure, dishonour, ridicule, scorn? George—my dear brother!" she exclaimed, throwing herself at his feet and clasping her hands wildly, "listen, I beseech thee, to the prayer of a penitent woman—an agonizing mother—and assist me to save my son!"

"Rise, Sophia—rise," said the Prince, somewhat moved again by the spectacle of his sister's highly wrought anguish. "I will see what can be done in the matter. If the Habeas Corpus was suspended just at this moment, I would soon manage the thing by having him seized—locked up—and subjected to some reformatory process. As it is, I may have him kidnapped and put on board a ship bound for the colonies—taking care to provide for him a good situation on his landing in Canada, Jamaica, or New South Wales, just as the case may be."

"You will consider the matter—you will reflect upon it well?" said the Princess. "But promise me two things."

"Name them," observed his Royal Highness; "and then I will give you my answer."

"In the first place," rejoined Sophia, "promise me that no step shall be taken in the matter without my knowledge and concurrence: and in the second place you must pledge yourself that before the boy quits England for ever, you will by some means or other procure me an opportunity of seeing him for a moment—at some place and under such circumstances as to preclude the possibility of my being recognized by any one."

"And if I do all this for you," said the Prince, after a long pause, during which he remained buried in a deep reverie—"if I do all this for you, I say, will you undertake to do a certain service for me?"

"Oh! yes," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, well pleased at beholding the affair assume the appearance of a bargain; because she knew enough of her brother's selfish disposition to be aware that he was much more likely to do her a favour when he required one in return, than he would be if the obligation were all on one side. "Tell me what service you require at my hands—tell me what I can do for you——"

"By one of the inscrutable impulses of nature," said the Prince, his look suddenly assuming more of what may be termed a religious seriousness than for years past it had ever been accustomed to put on; "your maternal feelings Sophia, have been touched—and evidently to some depth. Whether it be curiosity to behold one's offspring—whether it be some intuitive prompting of latent love—or whether it be one of these impulses which have their origin in a moment of the heart's weakness, I cannot say: but not the less certain is it that I have more than once experienced, within the last year or two, a similar feeling to that which has this day manifested itself in you."

"What mean you, my dear brother?" inquired the Princess.

"I will soon explain myself," he continued. "In the same way that you experienced a desire to behold your son, even if it be only for a single moment—so am I influenced by an earnest longing to cast my eyes, if only for a moment likewise, upon my daughter! You know full well that Florence Eaton—the niece of Lord and Lady Florimel—is my own child—the daughter of that Octavia, Pauline's sister, whom I loved with so profound an adoration!"

"But Florence knows not that you are her father," observed the Princess, gently.

"No—nor is it necessary that she should—not a whit more necessary than that your son should be made aware that you are his mother. You are intimate with the Florimels," continued the Regent, "and you can so manage matters that some day—for a few moments—my daughter may appear in my presence and speak to me, although without being aware that she *is* my daughter!"

"Do you not know, George, that your name is seldom—very seldom mentioned in the presence of Pauline?—for her husband and her friends are ever fearful of reviving the memory of her dead sister."

"Yes—and also because the Florimels regard me as the destroyer of poor Ootavia's health, happiness, and life," added the Prince, in a mournful tone: and for an instant he seemed as if remorse had touched his heart—for an expression of unutterable anguish suddenly swept over his countenance. "But it will not be necessary for me and the Florimels to meet," he added immediately; "do you arrange matters in such a way that I may see my daughter for a few moments—that I may hear her voice—that I may compare her with the image of her mother, who is gone—and that, in a word, I may have the satisfaction of beholding my child, although I may not announce myself as her father, but must coldly retain my character as her Prince and the representative of her Sovereign. Do this for me, Sophia—pledge yourself to gratify me in that respect—and I will perform for you all that you have asked in reference to your son."

"It is a compact between us," said the Princess. "To-morrow I will see Pauline upon this subject."

"And I, on my part," rejoined the Prince, "will lose no time in deliberating on the best way to accomplish all you desire in respect to your son."

The brother and sister then separated—the former returning to Carlton House—and the latter remaining in her own apartment at St. James's Palace, to ponder upon the many, many things which sate heavy upon her mind.

CHAPTER CIII.

THE BARONET AND THE HANGMAN.

On the following day, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, Mr. Daniel Coffin was sitting on the step of his shop-door, smoking a long pipe, and conversing with a neighbour who was doing precisely the same on the opposite side of Fleet Lane. Jack the Foundling was in his own room, reading the history of Dick Turpin: Sally Melmoth was attending to her household duties; and Dick had gone out to pass an hour or two at some skittle-ground. Mr. Coffin was therefore "minding the shop," although he had very few customers at that time of the day, and would much rather have been without them altogether,—the shop being, as we have before informed our readers, a mere "blind" to serve as an ostensible source of income in addition to his official gains and perquisites as hangman.

What the conversation was about which he was carrying on with his neighbour, we do not propose to describe: suffice it to say that it was all of a sudden cut short by an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and alarm on the part of Daniel Coffin, as he beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon ascending the lane.

The reader will not fail to comprehend how it was that the Hangman's equanimity was disturbed for a moment on beholding the Baronet: for there was not only the adventure at Shooter's Hill in which Mr. Coffin was implicated, but there was likewise the grave episode of the fire;—and far more serious still, there was the murder of Nell Gibson. But the Hangman possessed, as we have frequently shown, a wondrous amount of presence of mind; and no sooner were his apprehensions conceived than by a rapid chain of reasoning he set them at rest once more.

"If the Baronet had meant to be nasty about the Shooter's Hill affair, he would have done something at once and not let a dozen days elapse like this. The same may be said about the fire at his house: and moreover any lawyer would tell him that he could not prove it was me and my pals that did it. Then as for the groom—no one can say but what he was burnt alive; for who would think he had been knocked on the head first? Lastly, it's out of all question for anybody to suspect that Nell Gibson has been made away with, except those who did it. So the Baronet can't be coming with the intention of doing me any harm—that's positive!"

Such were the thoughts which swept through the brain of Daniel Coffin; although at the same time he would much rather that Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not made his appearance in Fleet Lane at all—for when a person's conscience is not very pure, a shadow will sometimes disturb it.

"Well, Mr. Coffin," said the Baronet, pausing in front of the shop with a good-tempered look; "I have come to pay you a visit, you see."

"So I see indeed," returned the Hangman, with a grim smile: "but I hope there's no ill feeling between us on account of what took place down yonder some little time back."

"Ah! you mean the affair at the *Jolly Waggoner's* and then at Shooter's Hill?" said the Baronet, who, be it understood, did not know who were the authors of the conflagration of his house. "Well, I no doubt ought to owe you a little grudge for that proceeding on your part: but as I came out of it safe and sound, I will say nothing more on the subject. The truth is, I wish to speak to you on another little matter."

"Walk in, sir," exclaimed the Hangman, not only well pleased at finding that he was really free from danger, but also suspecting that the individual who had once stood the chance of being made a victim, was now come as a patron or employer. "Walk in, sir—and if you don't like to talk in the shop, you can step into my parlour—where," he added with another grim smile, "you shall be sure of good treatment."

"Oh! we can talk very well in the shop," returned the Baronet, glancing around, "since there is no one here but ourselves—and I presume we are secure against eaves-droppers?"

"Perfectly so," rejoined the Hangman. "And now, won't you sit down, sir, and make yourself quite at home?"

The Baronet accordingly took a chair, while Daniel Coffin lounged against the mantle-piece,

anxiously awaiting the explanation of his visitor's business.

"I have reason to know," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, fixing his eyes upon the executioner, "that you are not altogether unacquainted with the interior of Leveson House——"

"Ah! how the deuce did you discover that?" exclaimed Coffin.

"Never mind how I came to know it," said the Baronet. "It is sufficient for our present purpose that I am acquainted with the fact: and what is more, I have reason to believe that you are not altogether a stranger to those secret apartments in Leveson House one of which contains the curiously contrived arm-chairs."

"By goles!" cried the Hangman, "you seem to know all about it; and if you was ever caught in one of those chairs, you can perhaps judge how pleasant such captivity must be. But pray go on, sir, with what you was saying."

"I wish to know," proceeded Sir Douglas, "whether you could undertake to introduce yourself, at a particular hour, into Leveson House, and there lie concealed behind the curtains in one of the secret apartments until such time as some signal, to be previously agreed upon, should summon you forth?"

"There isn't a house in London that I can't introduce myself into somehow or another; and there isn't a door that I can't open by hook or by crook. But how am I to know," demanded the Hangman, "that all this mayn't be some plant on your part to get me into a scrape and revenge yourself for that little business down at Shooter's Hill?"

"The answer is easy, both to be given and to be understood," replied Sir Douglas. "If I really had the intention of punishing you, I should not condescend to devise a trap to ensnare you; nor should I beat about the bush in a manner alike unnecessary and ridiculous: but I should at once give you into custody, and allow the law to become my avenger. But for the sake of that young woman Ellen Gibson——"

"Ah! she *is* a nice young woman too, notwithstanding all her faults," observed the Hangman, with a diabolical hypocrisy. "We have quite forgiven her for having put you up to the dodge at the hut; because she handed us over the hundred guineas you sent us through her, and so all was right. Well, I am satisfied now on second thoughts, that you don't mean any treachery in getting me to Leveson House: besides which, I always have at least a couple of barkers, and may be a dagger—with sometimes a bottle of vitriol—in my pocket; so that in any case," added Coffin, with a grin of diabolical ferocity, "I should be rather a troublesome customer to grapple with. I think you would sooner catch a lion or a boa constrictor without injury to yourself, than take me alive. A bullet in the brain—a dagger planted in the heart—or a bottle of vitriol smashed on the head——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Baronet, "you need not recapitulate all your modes of defence, because no injury is intended you. The plain facts are these:—The Marquis of Leveson is manœuvring to get a certain lady into his power; and I wish to take this lady's part and compel his lordship to renounce all further pretensions or claims, if indeed he have any, in that respect. This can only be done by proving that enough is known concerning his niece, Lady Ernestina, to involve her in serious trouble. *You* are the man whose presence at Leveson House on the occasion will strike terror and dismay into the hearts of the guilty ones, and bring matters to an issue that will serve my purpose. Now, do you consent to enact this part in the proposed drama? If so, name your price and it shall be paid—half in ready cash as an earnest of good faith, and the other half when we meet at Leveson House."

The Hangman reflected in silence for a few minutes. According to his arrangement with the Prince Regent on the preceding day, it was most probable that Lady Ernestina Dysart would be the messenger whom his Royal Highness would send to keep the appointment on Westminster Bridge a week thence, and pay over the five hundred guineas. Would it be prudent, then, for the Hangman to adopt a hostile course towards Lady Ernestina, and embark in any enterprise inimical to herself? *This* was the point which Coffin revolved in his mind. But then, on the other hand, here was Sir Douglas Huntingdon, no doubt ready to pay a handsome fee for the service he required; and Coffin was too avaricious and too greedy of gold not to snap at the present bait. Suddenly it struck him that by entering into a scheme thus hostile to Ernestina, it would positively and actually have the effect of rendering her all the more anxious to get him out of the country; and as he had told the Prince that he wanted the five hundred guineas for the purpose of emigrating, her ladyship, on learning that such was the case, would be all the more eager to supply him with the funds for his alleged departure. Besides, suppose that Ernestina should refuse to become the Prince's messenger on the night appointed for the payment of the money on Westminster Bridge, would not his Royal Highness entrust the matter to some other person? Most assuredly; for Daniel Coffin felt that the Prince would do anything rather than stand the chance of being troubled with farther visits from such a person as himself. All things thus considered, the Hangman resolved to accept Sir Douglas Huntingdon's proposal.

"Well, sir," he said, "I have just been thinking over the matter; and I don't see why I shouldn't earn a couple of hundred guineas in this way as well as another."

"From which remark," observed the Baronet, "I understand that you require two hundred guineas as your recompense?"

"Well, sir, I don't think I can do it for less. You see I shall have to get into Leveson House stealthily, as one may say—or at all events, however I may manage to get in, I shall have to creep about on the sly, and so stand the chance of being shot as a burglar."

"I do not object to the amount of the reward you ask," interrupted the Baronet. "On the contrary, here are bank-notes and gold for a hundred guineas:" then, having counted down the money, at the sight of which the Hangman's eyes twinkled with the sinister vibrations that are seen in those of a snake, Sir Douglas Huntingdon said, "It is for to-night that your services are required. By eleven o'clock must you be concealed behind the draperies in one of the rooms belonging to the private suite; and when you hear me say *that the public executioner*

himself can bear testimony to the infamies of those chambers, you must come forth from your hiding-place."

"Then you will be there to-night also?" said the Hangman inquiringly.

"I shall," returned the Baronet. "And now I think we understand each other fully?"

"We do so," rejoined the Hangman.

The Baronet then took his leave; and Daniel Coffin hastened to secure the hundred guineas in some secret place where he was wont to deposit his ill-gotten gains. Then for the rest of the afternoon and evening he amused himself with smoking, drinking, and pondering upon the best means of obtaining ingress to Leveson House.

It was about half-past nine o'clock at night when he secured his pistols, dagger, skeleton-keys, dark lantern, and other burglarious apparatus, about his person; and enveloping himself in a capacious cloak, set off for the West End. It was half-past ten when he reached Albemarle Street; and he walked two or three times up and down in front of Leveson House, in order to ascertain in how many rooms lights were burning, and whether there were many people going out and in—so that he might form an idea whether the house was tolerably quiet or not. The result of his observation was that the mansion was remarkably tranquil: and on the front-door being opened to take in a letter, the Hangman's eyes, plunging into the hall, observed no one loitering there except the porter himself. Accordingly, a minute or two after the messenger had delivered the letter, the Hangman stepped boldly up to the front-door and gave a sort of uncertain double knock, like the timid and hesitating summons of a poor tradesman.

The hall-porter immediately opened the door; whereupon Daniel Coffin, with the coolest impudence imaginable, bestowed a familiar nod upon the official, as if to imply "that it was all right," and walked in without a word. The hall-porter remembered to have seen that ill-looking face before: for indeed, if once viewed, it could not very well be forgotten. He had seen Coffin, be it remembered, on the night that he called to obtain an interview with Lady Ernestina Dysart, and also on the morning when he went thither relative to Ariadne. Besides, as the porter was well aware that some queer characters occasionally visited Leveson House for the purpose of ministering to the intrigues of the Marquis in respect to the fair sex, he was by no means astonished at seeing such an ill-looking fellow as Coffin make his appearance there. Moreover, remembering his face, and observing the air of assurance with which he so coolly entered, the porter naturally supposed that he had come in pursuance of some appointment; and therefore he said not a word, but let him pass on.

This was precisely what Daniel Coffin had calculated upon; and traversing the hall, he ascended the stairs with all the self-sufficiency of a visitor who knew that he was expected. Fortune favoured his enterprise: for he did not encounter a soul as he proceeded up the marble staircase, traversed the landing, and sought the Crimson Drawing-Room. But had he met any of the dependants, he was prepared with some kind of subterfuge to explain his presence in the mansion.

Coffin had previously ascertained, from the observation he had made in the street, that there were no lights in the Crimson Drawing-Room—the situation of which apartment in the house he had experienced no trouble in recollecting, for the memory of the accomplished burglar is rendered keenly acute to all such details as these. The Hangman accordingly entered that drawing-room without the slightest hesitation; and he found it unoccupied and dark, as he had expected. By aid of the skeleton-keys, he at once entered the mysterious suite of apartments, which he had explored on the first occasion of his visit to Leveson House.

Here we must leave Mr. Daniel Coffin for a short time, and transfer the attention of the reader to another apartment in the same spacious and splendid mansion. The chamber to which we now introduce ourselves, is that of Lady Ernestina Dysart: and the beauteous but depraved occupant thereof has just retired thither, it being now nearly eleven o'clock.

But Lady Ernestina felt no inclination to seek her couch. Her naturally fervid temperament and strong passions had recently produced in her a certain restlessness and uneasiness, for which she herself could scarcely account. The consummate hypocrisy of her situation, not only compelling her to wear widow's weeds, but also to maintain the seclusion of a widow, served as it were as a retribution and a punishment. She had no opportunity of gratifying those longings which inspired her, nor of appeasing those passions which devoured her. Were she able to go out into society, how soon might she form a connexion of a tender nature: but cooped up as she was by the necessity of affecting to mourn for the death of that very husband whom she herself had been the means of sending to the scaffold, she was entombed in a seclusion that every day grew more and more intolerable. Her imagination was most prurient and licentious—her disposition both fervid and depraved: and thus her passions, while unappeased, were like serpents gnawing at her vitals.

Hence was it that Lady Ernestina Dysart, on the present occasion, experienced no inclination to retire to rest. She knew that her uncle the Marquis had some intrigue on hand; but what it was, or who its object might be, she was unaware. Nevertheless, the mere thought that an intrigue of such a nature was in progress beneath that roof, was sufficient to give such an impulse to her thoughts as to set her very imagination in a flame. In this morbid state of mind was it that she began to experience an irresistible longing to inspect once more the sculptured and pictorial representations of love and pleasure with which her uncle's private gallery was filled.

Taking up a candle, Ernestina stealthily quitted her room and repaired to that bed-chamber whence there was a private door into the apartment containing the mechanical chairs. That this bed-chamber would no more be used by the Marquis of Leveson, she well knew; inasmuch as the terrible episode connected with Ariadne Varian, had left such an impression upon his lordship's mind as to induce him to order that chamber to be shut up at least for the present. Ernestina therefore felt confident that she ran no risk of discovery by proceeding that way: and locking the outer door after her, she traversed the cham-

ber where poor Ariadne had passed through all the phases of her appalling trance!

Opening the door of the dressing-room by means of the secret spring, Ernestina proceeded into the room adjoining; and thence she passed into the gallery containing the sculptures and the pictures.

Carrying the wax candle in her hand, she proceeded to examine the various groups of statuary and the splendid specimens of the limner's art: but the farther she advanced down the gallery, the more consuming became the passions that were excited in her bosom. Beneath the sable weeds of mourning raged the frenetic desires of a Bacchanal: the virgin white collar which covered her breast, rose and sank with the sensuous palpitations of the heaving globes beneath. Above her flushing countenance sate the widow's cap, of as snowy a purity as the collar upon her bosom: but instead of setting off to advantage a face where Christian resignation was blended with a soft melancholy, its vivid whiteness threw out in stronger contrast the cheeks that were thus crimsoned with the mantling glow of consuming desire. The heart of that woman was a volcano at this moment, as she gloated upon all the refinements of sensuality that were scattered around.

Presently she paused before a mirror stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and reflecting every object in the gallery upon its polished surface. Heavy crimson draperies hung on each side of this mirror, and festooned along the top; so that no gilded frame-work was visible—and the effect thus produced was that of the prolongation of the gallery to a considerable length. Ernestina caught a glimpse of herself in this resplendent mirror, and was about to turn away when she was struck with the deep crimson of her countenance: and feeling the fires that were burning in her bosom, she stood to observe their effect upon her features.

"The face," she thought within herself, "is too faithful a reflex of the human heart. Were any one to see me now, it would be impossible to prevent all my secret thoughts from being probed to the very bottom! Ah! the countenance is indeed a tablet——"

But at this moment Ernestina gave a sudden start as if a viper had bitten her—and the colour fled from her cheeks as rapidly as darkness supervenes in a room at night when the candle is suddenly extinguished.

For, as she stood gazing upon the mirror, she was struck with the sudden apparition of a figure stealing in from the door at the other extremity of the room: and a mortal terror at once seized upon the miserable woman, as she recognised the too well-known form and features of the Public Executioner!

CHAPTER CIV.

TERROR.

It was a wonder that Lady Ernestina did not drop the candle from her hand: but perhaps it was the convulsing horror that seized upon her entire frame that made her fingers grasp it with a spasmodic rigidity.

Scarcely had she caught that glimpse of the Hangman, when he glided suddenly behind a curtain close by the door: and when he had thus disappeared from her view, Ernestina breathed more freely again. Terror loosened the iron grasp which it had fastened upon her, and she experienced a sudden relief on observing that the dreadful man was not coming to accost her then and there!

Calling all her presence of mind to her aid, she turned slowly and in a leisurely manner from the mirror, and took a seat in one of the superb chairs which were placed at intervals along the gallery. These chairs, be it understood, were *not* provided with any treacherous mechanism; and Ernestina thus sat down, not so much to collect her thoughts as because the sudden terror she had just experienced made her limbs feel heavy and had stricken her as it were with the numbness of sore fatigue.

Placing the candle upon the pedestal of a statue, she leant her head upon her beautiful white hand—wondering within herself what on earth the Hangman could possibly be doing within the walls of Leveson House again. That he had come not to seek her, was pretty evident—inasmuch as he had just concealed himself behind a curtain, doubtless imagining that his presence and proceeding were not perceived in the mirror. Then, what was he doing there? Had he come to rob the house?—or was he in any way engaged in the intrigue which her uncle had in hand for that night? This was the most reasonable supposition that presented itself to Ernestina's mind; and she felt convinced it must be a correct one. For she had heard from the Marquis that it was Daniel Coffin who had brought Ariadne Varian to Leveson House; and therefore it did not appear extraordinary that he should be again employed in the nobleman's service.

Having come to the conclusion that she had thus solved the mystery of Daniel Coffin's presence there on the present occasion, Lady Ernestina became deeply anxious to quit the gallery and return to her own room. She felt as if she were in the vicinage of some fearful though hidden danger. It was the feeling which may be supposed to inspire the Hindoo traveller, when passing beneath the overhanging branches of a wood where boa constrictors are known to lie in ambush, ready to dart down upon their prey. Indeed, nothing could equal—and assuredly nothing could transcend—the horror which Ernestina entertained for that terrible individual,—not so much because she knew him to be the most consummate of scoundrels—nor because he was the public executioner, whose very hands might almost be supposed to feel clammy with the touch of the strangled dead—but because he had dug the grave in which her paramour was interred at the Blackheath villa!

Conquering her emotions as well as she was able, and assuming as calm and placid a demeanour as she could possibly put on, Ernestina rose from the chair—took the candle—and moved towards the door. But she felt herself shuddering—she felt herself quailing—she felt, too, that it was almost impossible to look unconcerned, or to seem as if she fancied herself alone in that place: for her very sensations told her that from behind the curtain near the door, the sinister looks of the Public Executioner were fixed upon her! Recurring to

the illustration of the Hindoo traveller, we may observe that the effect was with Lady Ernestina the same as if she had to pass a place whence a snake would fling forth its hideous length and wind itself with rapid whirling coils around her—and as if she already beheld the eyes of the reptile gleaming forth at her from its ambush. Thus, with increasing trepidation—with a nervousness rapidly amounting to an excruciation—did she advance towards the door. She was apparently looking straight forward: and yet with a sort of side-long gaze was she watching that curtain behind which the Hangman was concealed—as if every moment she expected it to be flung aside and display the terrible intruder.

But Ernestina's appalling fears were not realized: the curtain remained closed—and all was still—all was tranquil behind it. She reached the door, which stood open: she passed into the next room—and then she threw a shuddering look over her shoulder, to see if the Hangman were not behind her. But no one was there: and regaining courage, she pressed the secret spring to open the admirably-contrived door in the wainscot. Passing out of her uncle's mysterious, or rather infamous suite of apartments, she traversed the dressing-room and the bed-chamber and emerged upon the landing; where the rapid glance which she flung around at once reassured her that no one was nigh. Breathing now with comparative freedom, she ascended to her own chamber; and locking the door, she flung herself into an arm-chair, exhausted with the overwhelming effects of the few minutes of stupendous terror through which she had just passed.

And now the thought struck her that if the Marquis of Leveson had not really engaged the services of Daniel Coffin for some intrigue or another, it was absolutely necessary he should be informed of the presence of that individual within the walls of the mansion. But then—what excuse could she allege for having been in that gallery?

Depraved as she was—depraved as her uncle was—and depraved as they knew each other thus to be, Ernestiua nevertheless shrank from the idea of looking the Marquis in the face and confessing that her heated imagination had alone impelled her to visit his museum of artistic devilries and exquisite abominations. She therefore resolved to allow matters to take their chance, though she herself would not be able to seek her couch that night with the knowledge that Daniel Coffin was concealed about the premises.

While these thoughts were still agitating in her mind, she was startled by a sudden knocking at her chamber-door: and hastening to open it, she perceived that it was her lady's-maid.

"Ah! my lady," exclaimed the girl, "I am glad that your ladyship has not yet retired to rest."

"Why?—what has happened?—is anything the matter?" demanded Ernestina, all sorts of terrible things connected with the Hangman springing up in her imagination.

"Oh! nothing that I know of, my lady," replied her maid: "but his lordship's valet has just told me to run up and inform your ladyship that the Marquis would be glad to see you immediately if you were not yet undressed."

"Where is his lordship?" asked Ernestina, wonder now somewhat taking the place of terror.

"In the Gilded Saloon, my lady," was the response: "and I believe that there is company with his lordship."

"Who can they be? and what can this mean?" said Lady Dysart, in a low musing tone, as she hastily surveyed herself in a looking-glass to make sure that her toilette was in becoming order ere she obeyed the summons from the Marquis of Leveson.

But we must here digress for a little space in order to make our readers understand how it was that Ernestina's presence was thus peremptorily required at nearly half-past eleven o'clock at night in the Gilded Saloon.

CHAPTER CV.

THE WITNESS.

On this same evening Miss Bathurst gave an entertainment at her house in Stratton Street; and amongst the guests were Lord and Lady Sackville—the former, as the reader will remember, being the nephew of the hostess.

Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot were staying with Miss Bathurst, and consequently they were of the party. Lady Curzon was also present; and if Venetia had not been there, the diadem of Beauty's Queen might have been placed upon the brow of Editha. But every star of fashion—every luminary of the aristocratic world of female charms—was eclipsed by the brilliant Venetia; and while she enjoyed the universal homage of the male sex, she was at once the object of envy and adoration on the part of the ladies. In the former instance her beauty was the principal talisman of her more than imperial sway: in the latter, the secret of her power was the fact that she was the Royal Favourite.

But while Venetia, immediately after her arrival at Miss Bathurst's, became the radiant centre of an adoring group, her husband had engaged the Countess of Curzon for the first dance. Until this evening, Horace and Editha were not particularly well known to each other: they had often met in the *reunions* of fashion, it was true—but when the young man was plain *Mr. Sackville*, he had attracted no special notice on Editha's part. Now, however, that he was *Lord Sackville*, the case was mighty different; and as he accosted her on the present occasion, she greeted him with her sweetest smile. He sate down by her side—and as he gazed furtively upon her, it struck him that she was assuredly a most beautiful creature; while on her part, Editha wondered that she should never have before noticed how exceedingly handsome in person and elegant in manners was Lord Sackville. Being thus mutually pleased, they soon fell into a very agreeable and interesting strain of conversation until the quadrille began. Then they danced together—and when the quadrille was over, they went into the music-room: and Editha, being a proficient with the guitar—at that period a fashionable instrument—consented to practise a duet with Lord Sackville. Now, as there were very few persons in that apartment at the time—the greater portion of the guests being in the quadrille-rooms—Lord Sackville and Lady Curzon were enabled to amuse themselves without much constraint: and what with a little singing and more tender looks, varied by some agreeable discourse, they soon came to be very much pleased with each other.

Venetia, while lounging through the rooms upon the arm of some adoring Duke, caught sight of her husband bending over Editha with tender looks: and for an instant the flush of jealousy mantled upon her cheeks—but only for an instant! No sooner was the jealous sentiment conceived, when it was followed by the thought that she had no right to entertain it. Not only was there a compact between her husband and herself that they were both to pursue their own pleasures independent of the moral restraint of the connubial vows; but she had already availed herself of that immunity in admitting the Earl of Curzon to her arms. Banishing the jealous sentiment, therefore, she bestowed upon Editha a most affable salutation, and on her husband a look of cordial familiarity, as she passed them by: and bidding her ducal companion conduct her back to the quadrille-rooms, she left her husband and Editha to continue their *tête-à-tête* without constraint.

But at about a quarter to eleven Venetia stole away from the gay scene and the brilliant throng: and retiring into Miss Bathurst's own bed-chamber, she put on a bonnet provided with a thick veil, and threw a capacious mantle over her elegant ball-dress. Then, hastily descending the stairs, she proceeded on foot to Albemarle Street, which, be it remembered, is only two minutes' walk from Stratton Street: and as the night was fine and dry, she accomplished that trifling distance without any inconvenience.

But let us now return to the interior of Leveson House, thus preceding Lady Sackville's visit thither; and we shall see what preparations the amorous Marquis has made for her reception.

Remembering that on the previous occasion of Venetia's visit to his mansion, she had been shown to the Crimson Drawing-room, whence she had penetrated into the adjoining suite of chambers, Lord

Leveson now deemed it fitting to receive her in another apartment. Accordingly, he had ordered the most sumptuous room in his mansion, and which bore the title of the *Gilded Saloon*, to be prepared for the occasion. And well did that apartment deserve its title: for nothing could be more sumptuous—nothing more superb. The ceiling was painted to represent the most curious mosaic work inlaid with gold: the cornices were massive, elaborately carved, and covered with gilding;—the walls were painted a rich blue that served as a ground for a tracery of arabesques executed in gilding. The draperies were of purple velvet, with massive golden fringes sweeping the thick carpet, which was of a pattern to match the walls and curtains. The chandeliers were suspended to the ceiling by gilt chains; and every article of furniture consisted of rosewood inlaid with gilding. The mantels—for there were two fireplaces in this spacious room—were covered with the richest or-molu ornaments: and thus when the wax-tapers were lighted the effect produced by the whole scene was grand, gorgeous, and magnificent to a degree.

It was in this sumptuous apartment that the Marquis of Leveson anxiously awaited the coming of Venetia at about ten minutes to eleven. The reader has already seen enough of his character to comprehend what his feelings must have been, and how his passions were excited, at the prospect of the delicious victory which now at length appeared to be within his reach. For he thought to himself that the most splendid woman England ever produced—a woman of such incomparable loveliness that not even the most fastidious critic could find aught to cavil at in feature, contour, or mien—was coming to abandon herself to his arms! He felt that all the joys and pleasure of his long life, if taken together and made to distil in their aggregate all the essence of bliss, were still dull and insipid when compared with the transcending happiness—the ineffable concentration of elysian delights which now appeared to be in store for his enjoyment.

The time-pieces on the two mantels chimed eleven; and while the silvery sounds were still vibrating in the perfumed air of the Gilded Saloon, the door was thrown open by the discreet Brockman—and a lady, enveloped in a cloak and with a black veil folded two or three times over her countenance, was ushered into the presence of the Marquis. The door instantaneously closed behind her; and raising her veil, she revealed the splendid countenance of Lady Sackville.

"You are come, my dear Venetia—you are come!" said the Marquis, flinging himself upon his knees before her. "And now do I apologise—most sincerely, most earnestly—indeed most humbly apologise—for any harsh or insulting words to which I may have given utterance yesterday. I spoke of revenge: but heaven knows I am incapable of experiencing a vindictive feeling now! Nothing but love shall engage my thoughts: nothing but adoration and worship can entrance my soul in your presence. Oh! if it were possible that you could so far forgive me on account of the past as to gaze upon me—not with a look expressive of the deep consciousness of a sacrifice—but with smiles indicative of unalloyed tenderness,—Oh! do this, Venetia—regard me thus kindly—tell me that you no longer cherish animosity towards me—and what is there that I am not prepared to do for thee? My fortune—my wealth—everything—shall be laid at your feet—be placed at your disposal: and while none need suspect our amour, you can still remain the Royal Favourite, and yet render the Marquis of Leveson, who now kneels at your feet, supremely happy!"

When first Lady Sackville had raised the dark veil, her countenance became somewhat serious, although by no means expressive of any very strong emotion—because she had nothing to fear nor to inspire her with loathing and disgust at the part which she was acting, inasmuch as she felt assured of being rescued from the necessity of making the crowning sacrifice. When she beheld the Marquis throw himself on his knees, she could not help experiencing a sensation of pride and triumph at the consciousness of that power of beauty which thus humbled princes and nobles at her feet: and then, as Leveson contrived to pour forth his rhapsody of mingled adulation, apology, entreaty, and dazzling proposal, the light of satisfaction grew more radiant upon her features—for she saw how his hopes were elevated, and she joyed in the prospect of that revenge which would speedily convert them into the bitterest disappointment.

"My lord," she said, gently withdrawing the hand which he had snatched while uttering the last few words of his impassioned address, "I beseech you to rise from this suppliant posture. It ill becomes a great and powerful nobleman such as you, to kneel at the feet of an unpretending woman such as I."

"O angelic creature!" exclaimed the enraptured Marquis, his head too much lost in dreams of bliss to allow him to notice the slight accent of sarcasm with which Venetia had spoken; "you speak of yourself with a humility that is too disparaging!—for the whole world of taste, fashion, and aristocracy recognizes in you the peerless queen of beauty."

"And doubtless these united worlds of which your lordship speaks," said Venetia, with an irony charmingly veiled beneath a smile, "have deputed you to become the mouthpiece of their flatteries."

"Flatteries!" cried the Marquis, starting to his feet; "they are truths—irrefragable, patent, delicious truths! But do you not intend to lay aside this cloak which envelopes a form combining the graces of Venus with the luxuriance of Flora, the majesty of Juno, and the imposing splendour of Diana!"

"Ah! my lord," interrupted Venetia, with a merry laugh, "you would personify in me all the attributes of the heathen divinities!"

"Every idea of beauty which I can possibly conceive," said the Marquis, gazing upon Venetia with the devouring eyes of passion, "must be called into request to depict your loveliness. But let me remove that invidious bonnet with its great thick veil—let me loosen the strings of this shrouding mantle ——"

"Hush! some one approaches!" ejaculated Venetia: and she drew the veil over her countenance.

At the same moment a knock at the door of the saloon was heard; and the Marquis hastened to see who was there—muttering to himself, "Perdition! what can this interruption mean? I ordered that on no account was I to be disturbed;"—then on opening the door and beholding his valet Brockman, he demanded in an impetuous tone, "What do you want?"

"This gentleman insists upon seeing your lordship. He would take no excuse—and indeed he

has even thought fit to follow me hither;"—and as Brockman thus spoke, he looked round towards some one behind.

"Ah!" ejaculated the Marquis, an expression of bitter annoyance and deep misgiving suddenly appearing upon his countenance, as he beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon advancing along the passage leading from the principal landing to the portal of the Gilded Saloon.

"My dear Marquis," said the Baronet, in a friendly—or indeed with the familiar manner of former times,—"I wished most particularly to speak to you: and knowing that I am at all times welcome, I persisted in making Brockman introduce me hither. He is a very excellent servant, I know: and therefore I forgive him the little impertinence implied in the supercilious manner with which he spoke of me as *this gentleman*,—just for all the world as if he did not know me as well as his own master."

"But my dear Huntingdon," said Lord Leveson, in a tone of remonstrance, "I am engaged—delicately engaged at this moment——"

"Not too delicately to receive an old friend like me," returned the Baronet: and without more ado, he walked straight into the Gilded Saloon.

The Marquis, who saw some evil intent lurking beneath the affected good humour of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, made a sign for the valet to withdraw: and closing the door again, he turned with deep anxiety towards Venetia, to ascertain by her proceedings whether this intrusion was a pre-arranged scheme between the intruder and herself.

"My lord," said the Baronet, now suddenly throwing off the mask of familiarity, which he had worn in the presence of the valet for the purpose of preventing that menial from suspecting that anything extraordinary was in progress,—"my lord," he said, adopting a stern and imperious tone, "you will have the kindness to request the attendance of your niece Lady Ernestina Dysart."

"My niece!—and wherefore?" exclaimed the Marquis, as much in amazement as in anger.

"Because I wish to say a few words in her ladyship's presence," rejoined the Baronet, with the tone and look of a man who meant to enforce his designs and had the power to do so.

"But wherefore my niece?" cried the Marquis, now trembling with the apprehension of something wrong. "Would you expose me in her presence?"

"My lord, I have no doubt," answered the Baronet, with a peculiar smile, "that her ladyship is tolerably well aware of all your lordship's proceedings. Was she not your accomplice in inveigling Miss Louisa Stanley ——"

"Ah! the mention of that name," exclaimed the Marquis, with an expression of fiendish malignity, "reminds me that if there is to be exposure on one side, there shall be exposure on the other—and that if you mean to proclaim any secret matters connected with the name of *Leveson*, I shall hold myself justified in making public all I know in connexion with the name of *Stanley!*"

"You will tell a different story presently," said the Baronet, with a look which made the Marquis quail, for he felt how deeply he was already in Huntingdon's power on account of the affair of Ariadne, and he likewise saw full well the Baronet had somehow or another obtained a still deeper hold upon him than even *that*—but how or in reference to what circumstance he could not conjecture.

"Will you explain yourself, Huntingdon?" accordingly asked the bewildered and terrified nobleman: "will you tell me what all this means? Venetia, I appeal to you—is it to be peace or war between us?"

"A treaty of peace, if you will," responded Lady Sackville, who had hitherto remained a silent but not uninterested witness of the scene: then raising her veil and bending her indignant looks upon the Marquis, she added, "But it must me a treaty of peace accompanied by guarantees and securities—and those can only be explained in the presence of Lady Ernestina Dysart."

"Lady Sackville's remark furnishes the key to the whole business," observed the Baronet: "and to cut the discussion short, I do *this*:"—then, as he pulled the gilded bell-rope, he said, "Now your lordship can give orders for Lady Ernestina to be fetched hither."

Brockman speedily answered the summons: and Lord Leveson, mastering his emotions as well as he was able, gave him that message which, as the reader has already seen, was delivered to Ernestina through the medium of her lady's-maid.

When Ernestina, in pursuance of this message, repaired to the Gilded Saloon, she first noticed her uncle pacing uneasily to and fro: then her eyes rested upon the Baronet, to whom she bowed with haughty coldness, while a blush at the same time suffused her countenance, as she felt that he must entertain a very mean and contemptuous opinion of her indeed after her conduct in the affair of Louisa Stanley. But her looks, speedily flitting away from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, fell upon the countenance of Venetia, whom she knew by sight, having once or twice beheld her riding in her carriage in the park.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," said the Baronet, "this is Lady Sackville."

A scarcely perceptible bow took place on either side: for those two women felt that they stood as enemies in each other's presence. But even while thus exchanging this slight salutation, they darted upon each other a look of scrutinizing curiosity. Indeed, the two handsomest ladies in London—perhaps in all England—were at this moment face to face: and the mutual hostility which they experienced, arose not from the comparatively lofty rivalry of beauty, but from the meaner and more paltry cause that each was acquainted with certain secrets regarding the other, thus placing them as it were mutually in each other's power.

"Now that her ladyship is present," Sir Douglas Huntingdon hastened to observe, "we will with your permission, my lord, repair to the Crimson Drawing Room."

"And wherefore?" demanded Leveson, gazing in stupid astonishment upon Sir Douglas, while Lady Ernestina grew more and more nervous every instant.

"You will see anon," was the Baronet's reply. "Wherefore waste time in useless questions and answers?"

"True," muttered the Marquis, feeling that the sooner all suspense was got rid of, the better. "Come then to the Crimson Drawing Room."

And Lord Leveson accordingly led the way thither, followed by Venetia (who drew her veil

down), Ernestina, and the Baronet. Brockman, whom they encountered on the landing, hastened to light the wax candles in the drawing-room in obedience to his lordship's order. When this was done and the valet had retired, both the Marquis and Ernestina bent their looks with evident anxiety upon the Baronet for an explanation of his proceedings: but they were still more amazed and likewise alarmed, when Huntingdon advanced towards the door opening into the mysterious suite of apartments. Finding it locked—for the Hangman had fastened it again on passing that way ere now—the Baronet said in a voice which showed that he meant to be obeyed, "Your lordship will be pleased to open this door."

"For what purpose?" asked the nobleman, trembling with the very vagueness of his apprehensions.

But a mortal terror now seized upon Lady Ernestina: for the thought instantaneously flashed to her mind that the presence of Daniel Coffin in that suite of apartments was most probably connected with the present proceeding of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Perceiving, however, the necessity of maintaining her presence of mind for any emergency that might transpire, she exerted all her moral strength to subdue her agonizing emotions and become equal to the ordeal through which it seemed as if she were doomed to pass.

"The key, my lord!" ejaculated Huntingdon impetuously: "wherefore persist in thus wasting valuable time?"

Without giving utterance to another word either of remonstrance or remark, Lord Leveson at once produced the key and opened the door.

"Now let us walk in," said the Baronet, leading the way into the first room of that mysterious suite—not the room, be it understood, containing the mechanical chairs; but the one luxuriously furnished with sofas arranged all around against the walls, in the oriental fashion.

Having brought one of the wax-candles in his hand from the Crimson Drawing Room, Sir Douglas proceeded to light those which stood on the mantel of this elegantly-furnished apartment: and observing that the door into the next room of the suite stood open, he so held the light for a moment as to enable him to plunge his looks across that room, so as to ascertain that the door at the extremity leading into the gallery was likewise opened. These observations he made with inward satisfaction: for he felt confident that wherever the Hangman might be concealed, he would hear the signal previously concerted for his appearance.

While Sir Douglas was lighting the candles, Venetia took a seat upon the sofa, and Lady Ernestina placed herself at a little distance. The Marquis leant his elbow on the mantel, and gazed with evident uneasiness upon the Baronet, who thus so coolly but yet so appropriately acted as Master of the Ceremonies in the proceeding which he himself appeared to have so strangely got up.

"Now, my lord," said the Baronet, throwing himself negligently upon the sofa, "it is time that we should come to an understanding together upon a certain subject. This subject is the claim which you assert with regard to Lady Sackville—a claim which I cannot denominate as one of *love*, nor which I need particularize at all. Suffice it to say that now—this night and for evermore—must a settlement of the matter take place. But how stands the affair? Let us see. Accident has made your lordship acquainted with certain circumstances which Lady Sackville does not wish revealed; whereas your lordship threatens her with a revelation of those circumstances unless she will consent to listen favourably to your overtures. But in *me* behold the sincere, conscientious, and resolute friend of Lady Sackville—once the friend of your lordship, and still disposed to continue your lordship's friend, provided we come to an amicable understanding this night."

"And that understanding?" demanded Lord Leveson, impatiently.

"A treaty of peace," responded Huntingdon, "as Lady Sackville herself hinted ere now: but with such guarantees for its inviolable maintenance on your lordship's part——"

"And those guarantees?" exclaimed the Marquis, interrogatively.

"Listen," rejoined the Baronet: "and a few words will explain them. On the one side you are acquainted with certain secrets relative to Lady Sackville—and you hold them in terror over her: but on the other hand Lady Sackville is acquainted with certain secrets relative to *you*, and therefore she balances her power against your's. The consequence is, that if you expose Lady Sackville, she will expose you: and therefore Lady Sackville and yourself stand upon equal terms."

"No such thing!" exclaimed the Marquis, thinking to himself that if the Baronet's scheme went no farther than this, it was not a very formidable one after all. "For look you, and understand the matter well," he continued, his tone and manner becoming more exultant as he continued. "The things that I know concerning Lady Sackville may be proclaimed without causing any injury to redound upon myself. But this is not the case with her. Let her go and tell that I possess this suite of rooms—explain all the mysteries of that gallery yonder—and she will be confessing that she has visited this museum of exquisite indelicacies and refined immoralities. Tell the tale of the mechanical chairs—say that Lady Sackville herself has been caught in one, and that Louisa Stanley has been similarly ensnared—and will the reputation of either lady be enhanced by proclaiming the fact that they have ever set foot within these rooms? No: for their own sake this tale will be kept quiet. Then, as for the affair of Ariadne Varian, I do not exactly know in what relation the girl may stand to you, Sir Douglas—but I think that if she possess the feelings of delicacy for which you have given her credit in my hearing, she will not thank you for making her history a common topic and herself the theme of general discourse. Therefore, all the secrets which you know concerning me, are secrets which neither *you*, Sir Douglas—nor *you*, Lady Sackville, will choose to proclaim aloud, for your own sakes, and for the sake of those in whom you are interested."

"You therefore believe, my lord," said Huntingdon, "that you stand on the vantage-ground and that you can dictate your own terms to Lady Sackville?"—and as the Baronet thus spoke, his lip curled with a smile of defiance.

"I do believe that I stand upon that vantage-ground," replied the Marquis of Leveson, observing

the smile and not exactly liking it. "Have you anything more to say?"

"Yes—you force me into farther explanations," rejoined the Baronet. "Have you any regard for your niece Lady Ernestina?—and has her ladyship no secrets which *she* would be sorry to have revealed?"

"'Tis a manly proceeding," exclaimed Ernestina, her cheeks flushing and her eyes darting fire, "for you to make war upon me!"

"It is not I who make war upon your ladyship," answered the Baronet: "it is Lady Sackville who is availing herself of all the weapons of defence with which circumstances have armed her against the Marquis of Leveson. And therefore, if his lordship have really no regard for *you*, Lady Ernestina, he may indeed perhaps occupy the vantage-ground in respect to Lady Sackville: but if on the other hand his lordship has any regard for the reputation and honour of his niece——"

"But what know you of Lady Ernestina?" demanded Lord Leveson, hastily: "that she appeared to be placed in a somewhat suspicious position with regard to Louisa Stanley——"

"Certainly that is one fact, my lord," exclaimed the Baronet: "but it is nothing—absolutely nothing—it sinks into utter contempt, in comparison with the part which Lady Ernestina played in selling her own husband to the scaffold!"

A shriek thrilled from the lips of Ernestina, while the Marquis of Leveson started as if suddenly galvanized—and a smile of exultation and gratified revenge lighted up the countenance of Venetia.

"Ah! now you perceive that I am indeed acquainted with secrets of a tremendous import," continued the Baronet, glancing from the startled nobleman to his horror-stricken niece, who sate pale and trembling upon the sofa, gasping for breath, and with her eyes staring wildly: "and now perhaps it can be understood wherefore I deemed it proper—or at all events expedient—for Lady Ernestina Dysart to be present on this occasion? And if you ask me why I chose this apartment as the scene of our discussion, let me remind her ladyship that it belongs to the suite in which a compact was entered into by herself, a certain personage who shall be nameless, and a man holding a fearful and a dreaded office—a compact in virtue of which the late Paul Dysart was cheated by false hope until the very last instant! Therefore as the Public Executioner himself is no stranger to the mysteries and the infamies of this suite of apartments, surely the scene of such atrocities, such devilries, and such abominations as these rooms have witnessed, is the most fitting for such a debate as the present!"

At this moment a shadow darkened the threshold communicating with the next room—and Daniel Coffin made his appearance.

"O God!" groaned Lady Ernestina, in a paroxysm of ineffable anguish: and she covered her face with her hands to shut out that dreadful being from her view.

The Marquis of Leveson gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled rage and disgust. As for Venetia, whose veil was thickly folded over her countenance—though for a moment a shudder passed over her form on thus beholding the Public Executioner, yet at the next instant all sense of loathing was absorbed in that of triumph.

"Here is the witness," exclaimed the Baronet, "who can prove whether or not Lady Ernestina Dysart was the means of sealing the doom of her own husband!"

"O God! O God!" groaned the unhappy woman, writhing under the contortions of the heart's transcending anguish.

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon," said the Marquis of Leveson, suddenly walking straight up to the Baronet—clutching him by the arm—and speaking in a low hollow tone, "put an end to this dreadful scene and I will accept any terms you choose to dictate. But, for God's sake, spare my niece!"

"Not to me must you appeal, my lord—not to me!" returned Huntingdon: "But to Lady Sackville, whom you have menaced—outraged—humiliated——"

"Ah! hers is the triumph now!" rejoined the Marquis, bitterly: then accosting her abruptly as she sate still closely veiled upon the sofa, he said, "Will your ladyship say one kind word to Huntingdon on our behalf—for the sake of my niece and myself——or shall I fall down upon my knees at your feet——"

"No, no—this is sufficient!" hastily observed Venetia. "Sir Douglas will negotiate with you——"

"Good! ejaculated the Marquis: then with a low bow to Venetia, he drew the Baronet aside, saying, "What are your conditions?—name them——"

"You know them already," rejoined the Baronet: "inviolable secrecy in those matters which have come to your knowledge relative to Lady Sackville—a cessation of all overtures, persecutions, and proposals to her in future——"

"But you ere now spoke of guarantees for the fulfilment of this treaty on my part?" said Lord Leveson, inquiringly.

"Those guarantees—are they not furnished by the circumstances which have just transpired?" demanded the Baronet. "The treaty consists of silence, secrecy, and abstinence from all hostility on your part: and the guarrantee is that if you violate this compact you must expect no mercy to be shown towards your niece, Lady Ernestina."

"Enough, enough—it is a bargain!" returned the Marquis, in a hurried tone. "I abandon all pretension—all hope—in respect to Venetia," he added, in a scarcely audible voice: "but for God's sake, spare my niece—spare my family the infamy that such an exposure," and he glanced towards the Hangman, "would entail upon it!"

"Yes—upon the conditions stipulated you shall be spared that crowning degradation," said the Baronet. "But mark you well!—should the private affairs of Lady Sackville—you know what I mean—become whispered abroad ever so lightly,—should even the faintest rumour of those secrets obtain currency—the authorship will be at once attributed to yourself or to Lady Ernestina: and then pitilessly, without remorse—unhesitatingly indeed—shall everything be divulged concerning the mode adopted to send Dysart to the scaffold and to lull him into security through the medium of the Public Executioner himself! You understand me?"

"I do," responded the Marquis of Leveson, in a low deep tone—more indicative of a sense of utter humiliation than of angry passion.

The Baronet turned away and accosted Daniel Coffin, who for the two or three minutes that had

elapsed since he appeared upon the threshold, had been leaning in a free and easy manner against the door-post, viewing with the sardonic satisfaction of a Mephistophiles the sensation which his presence had excited.

"You may now take your departure," said the Baronet, placing a purse in his hands. "There are the remaining hundred guineas due to you for your services in this matter."

"'Tisn't always that I get two hundred guineas so cheap," observed the Hangman, with a coarse laugh. "Good night, my lord—good night all!" and stalking through the apartment, he issued forth by the door leading into the Crimson Drawing Room.

"Now, Venetia," whispered Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as he accosted Lady Sackville; "we also may depart."

Her ladyship accordingly rose from the sofa; and taking the Baronet's arm she accompanied him from the apartment, also passing through the Crimson Drawing Room. She kept the veil well folded over her countenance; but this precaution was scarcely necessary, for they encountered no one on the landing or the staircase—and the hall-porter was so overcome with drowsiness that he actually rose from his great leathern chair to open the door with his eyes shut, thus performing his duty mechanically rather than in full consciousness.

On issuing forth from Leveson House, Lady Sackville was escorted by the Baronet back to Miss Bathurst's residence in Stratton Street. There however he left her,—parting from her even before the front door was opened to give her admittance. Nevertheless, ere they had thus separated, a few rapidly whispered words of deep and tender meaning passed between them.

Venetia, hurrying up-stairs to Miss Bathurst's bed-room, threw aside the bonnet and cloak—arranged her hair before the mirror—assumed her brightest looks—and returned into the quadrille-room. There she was immediately surrounded by her admirers, who asked what had become of her for the last hour—for it was now midnight, and she had been a little more than an hour absent. "A temporary indisposition that compelled her to retire," was the ready apology; and many a worshipper expressed his grief to learn that her ladyship should have been indisposed even for an instant. The supper-rooms were now thrown open; and thither Venetia repaired, leaning on the arm of some nobleman. Her husband and the Countess of Curzon were still in each other's company—and Venetia saw that an amour was settled in that quarter.

It was about one o'clock when Lord and Lady Sackville took leave of Miss Bathurst and entered their carriage. During the ride back to Carlton House, which only occupied a few minutes, the husband and wife conversed on perfectly indifferent subjects—for Venetia did not think it worth while to let Horace know what had occurred at Lord Leveson's; and, on his part, he had not observed the temporary absence of his wife from his aunt's brilliant saloons.

On reaching Carlton House, Lord and Lady Sackville ascended to their own suite of apartments; and on the stairs they encountered Jessica, who made a quick and furtive sign of intelligence to her mistress. Venetia understood it well—so well, indeed, that it brought a blush of mingled shame and pleasure to her cheeks. Giving her husband to understand that the Prince proposed to pass the night with her, she hastened to her boudoir—pausing for a moment in the passage to intimate to Jessica that she would dispense with her services till the morning. But on entering the boudoir—on passing into that bower where the wax-tapers burnt upon the mantel and the air was warm and perfumed—the frail but beauteous Venetia was instantaneously clasped, not in the arms of the Prince Regent as she had led her husband to suppose, but in the warm and impassioned embrace of Sir Douglas Huntingdon!

It was therefore to an useful purpose that the Baronet, through his intimacy with the Prince, had learnt the secret of the private entrances to Carlton House; and if he had now availed himself of one of them in order to seek the boudoir of the enchanting Venetia, it assuredly was not without her consent nor without a previous stipulation for so blissful a reward!

CHAPTER CVI

ANOTHER SCENE AT LEVESON HOUSE.

When the Hangman, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and Lady Sackville had quitted the room where the strange and exciting discussion took place, Ernestina slowly withdrew her hands from her countenance and rose from her seat. She was pale—deadly pale; and there was a sort of staggering in her gait as if she experienced a vertigo or was tottering under a load of sorrows too heavy to endure.

"Well, Ernestina—it might have been worse," said Lord Leveson: "pray, therefore, console yourself."

"Good heavens! how can you ask me to console myself?" murmured his niece in a hollow tone; "when you perceive that this tremendous secret of mine is already known where it ought not to be: and who can say how widely it may be repeated again?"

"It is no use to anticipate the worst," said the Marquis, "or to go forward to meet misfortunes as if they did not advance upon us quick enough of their own accord. It is tolerably clear that the villain Coffin has whispered the tale to the Baronet, who has availed himself of it to coerce me into terms on the present occasion," he added, in a tone of bitter vexation.

"Yes, it must be as you say," rejoined Ernestina. "But it is horrible—horrible—to be in the power of that dreadful man!"

"Horrible indeed!" echoed the Marquis. "But how the deuce could he possibly have gained admission into the house? how concealed himself in these rooms?"

"An accomplished villain such as he," replied Ernestina, "can insinuate himself anywhere."

"Ah! I see that I must make a complete garrison of the house against such rascals," observed the Marquis: then in a peevish tone to himself he muttered something expressive of his bitter annoyance at having been defeated—so signally defeated—in his designs upon Lady Sackville.

Ernestina, exhausted in mind and body, and longing to be alone, bade her uncle good night and ascended once again to her own chamber. There she locked the door—flung herself with the listless abandonment of despair upon a seat—and gave way to her bitter reflections. But in the midst of this excruciating reverie, she was suddenly startled by a sound like the rustling of drapery: and this was immediately followed by the noise of something moving in the direction of the bed. The room was spacious; and the fire-place at which Ernestina was sitting was a dozen yards from the couch. Springing to her feet, she held her breath to listen and gazed with straining eyes towards the bed. Heavens! it was indeed no delusion: something was moving—some one was there;—and as the sickening truth struck upon her comprehension, the terrible fear was indeed confirmed by the appearance of a man thrusting himself forth from under the bed. Ah—horror! horror!—it was the Public Executioner!

A shriek—but low, and almost stifled with the harrowing nature of the feelings that produced it—fell from Ernestina's lips as she darted towards the bell-rope. But quick as lightning the thought flashed to her mind that she was so utterly in the man's power as to render exposure of *him* an inevitable step to the exposure of *herself!* She therefore stopped suddenly short—fixed upon him her wildly staring eyes—and with her quivering lips that were as pale as ashes, she gave utterance to a few hoarse words which were well nigh choked by the feelings that swelled up as it were into her very throat.

"What means this intrusion here?" was the demand which her parched tongue and white lips thus framed.

"A pretty question to a man who has done so much for you," exclaimed Coffin, with a horrible leer. "One would really think that you great ladies of fashion hadn't a bit of gratitude about you."

"In one word, what want you?" demanded Ernestina, her heart becoming ice to its centre. "Is it money—more money?—are you insatiable?"

"Insatiable? Yes—but not at this moment for gold—'tis for love," returned the Hangman.

"Love!" echoed Ernestina, with a fearful quivering in the voice: for the design which the wretch's words revealed, suddenly conjured up before her mental vision a new danger—one of even a more tremendous character than any which had previously menaced her.

"And why not *love?*" cried the Hangman, his looks wandering slowly over her fine form with the gloating avidity of brutal passion. "Do you think I hav'n't got the same feelings as other people? And if I am now speaking to you in this manner, you have only yourself to thank for it. I came to this house to-night for quite another purpose: but on finding my way into the gallery just now, who should I see there but your ladyship?"

"True!" murmured the miserable Ernestina, a rush of blood crimsoning her previously pale countenance.

"Ah! now you look handsomer than ever," ejaculated the Hangman. "But as I was telling you, if I had not seen your ladyship in that place filled with such precious objects for a delicate creature like yourself to contemplate, I should never have thought of proposing what I am going to do now. But since as a matter of course you went there to feast your eyes with all those pretty things, it is quite clear you are not over particular; and as variety is charming and you have had a Prince for your lover, perhaps now you won't object to accept Mr. Daniel Coffin in the same capacity?"

Stupified with dread horror, Ernestina stood gazing in speechless vacuity upon that man who dared to address her in this language. But did her ears deceive her?—was it a chimera of the brain?—or could it be really true, that this loathsome wretch—this hideous monster—could imagine for a moment that she, the high-born, tenderly nurtured, fastidiously reared lady of rank, should abandon herself to the embraces of such a revolting animal?

Good heavens! could it indeed be possible? Yes—as she gazed upon that ruffian, his looks—his manner—all demonstrated that his fearful words had indeed expressed the still more appalling purposes of his soul; and with a low moan of ineffable anguish, Ernestina staggered back a few paces and sank upon a seat.

"Come, come," said the Hangman, impatiently, "I really can't understand you ladies of fashion a bit. You don't mind employing a man like me to do all your dirty work—dig a hole in your garden by night to bury a dead body—gammon a husband with hopes that are never to be fulfilled so as to send him to the scaffold——"

"Hush, hush!" exclaimed Ernestina, once more starting from her seat, and this time in a positive agony of fearful excitement—for a flame was diffused throughout her entire being, molten lead appeared to be coursing through her veins, and the very chords of her brain seemed to be strung to the extremest verge of tension. "Monster—fiend—devil—I will no longer endure this constant persecution at your hands!"

"What is the use of calling me names," interrupted the Hangman, with a savage growl, though his looks still burnt with a fierce desire. "I tell you again that it is your own fault that I am now talking to you in this way. Seeing you in that gallery, in the midst of all those figures and pictures, put queer notions into my head, and as I watched you from behind the curtain where I was concealed, I thought to myself that after all you are one of the handsomest ladies I ever saw in my life. So I came to a certain resolution; and after the scene that took place just now, instead of leaving the house, I thought to myself that if I could only find your ladyship's chamber, I might make myself happy and comfortable there for the rest of the night. So I crept up stairs to this floor; and as the door of this very room stood open, I peeped in. That glance was enough. By the mere look of the room, the nick-nacks on the dressing-table, the mourning dresses hanging up in that clothes-press there that stands open—all these things told me in an instant that this was your ladyship's chamber. So here I am—and here I mean to remain till daylight."

While the Hangman was thus speaking, Ernestina interrupted him not, because she was revolving a thousand different and wildly impossible schemes in her mind. To pretend to yield to his humour and poison him—or to procure a knife and stab him to the heart—or else to fetch a pistol from her uncle's room and shoot him through the head—or, again, to alarm the house and have him

thrust forth at any risk,—these were some of the projects which entered her imagination, but which were discarded one after the other as soon as conceived. Thus, by the time he had ceased speaking, she had decided upon nothing, but was plunged in still more painful bewilderment, terror, and dismay than at first.

"You cannot be serious in what you say?" she suddenly cried, in a fit of desperation. "Tell me what will satisfy you—what sum do you require? Name the amount, and it shall be your's. Come with me to my uncle's chamber, and he will at once satisfy you on that score."

"It is not gold that I want just at this moment," said the Hangman, doggedly. "I have made two hundred guineas to-day from Sir Douglas Huntingdon—and six days hence I am to have five hundred more from the Prince Regent—which, by the bye, you yourself are to bring me——"

"I! what mean you?" exclaimed Ernestina, in amazement.

"Oh! it is all cut and dried between me and the Prince," returned the Hangman. "I honoured his Royal Highness with my noble presence at his crib—I mean Carlton House—yesterday; and we had a cozie chat together. I told him that I did not want to be made a Marquis, or a Duke, or an Earl, or any nonsense of that sort; but what I wanted was coin—blunt—cash—rhino!"

"Well—what next?" inquired Ernestina.

"The Prince promised that I should have five hundred guineas in a week—that is to say, next Wednesday night, at eleven o'clock, in the middle recess of Westminster Bridge on the left hand side going over, your ladyship is to put into my hands the sum named——"

"But what on earth made the Prince fix upon me?" demanded Ernestina, all her thoughts now turned into another channel.

"Oh! simply because he said that as you was interested in the matter, you ought to take a part in it. But it is possible, you know, that the Prince

may think better of it and send somebody else instead of your ladyship. It don't matter to me who it is, so long as some one keeps the appointment and brings the money."

While the Hangman was thus speaking, a thought which had suddenly sprung vaguely up in Ernestina's mind, rapidly expanded into a tangible consistency; and by the time he had concluded, it had settled down into a stern and inflexible resolution.

"The Prince, you say, intends me to become the bearer of a large sum of money for you next Wednesday night?"—and as she spoke, she assumed an air of comparative indifference.

"Yes—I have already told you so," returned the Hangman. "Middle recess—Westminster Bridge—next Wednesday night—at eleven o'clock—punctual to the instant—that's the appointment!"

"And you will be there?" said Ernestina, with a rapid sidelong glance at the man.

"Yes — trust me for that!" he answered. "I should think so, when five hundred guineas are to be got!"

"You will be there in person?" repeated Ernestina, evidently with a deepening pre-occupation of thought: "and you will not send anybody else?"

"No—not I!" ejaculated Daniel Coffin. "But, why are you putting all these questions?"

"Because — because," faltered Ernestina, the blood again rushing to her cheeks and then leaving them pale as death once more, so that it was evident she was swayed by some powerful emotion—or else perhaps by the sudden apprehension that the resolution which had ere now settled in her mind was suspected by the Hangman.

"Because what?" he demanded, impatiently.

"Because," she repeated, instantaneously recovering her self-possession, and now speaking with apparent earnestness and without hesitation,—"because if we are to meet that night, in the way you have described, you can in mercy accord me a delay until *then*—so that I may bring my mind to reflect with less aversion upon the sacrifice you demand."

"Ah!" ejaculated Coffin: "I understand your ladyship's tricks! You think to induce me to leave you now—and then you will trust either to the chapter of accidents or to the cooling down of my desires to save you from what I am now seeking? But I don't mean to be trifled with in this manner. Mine you shall be to-night—by fair means if you will—if not, by foul——"

And as he thus spoke, Daniel Coffin advanced towards Ernestina, his eyes flaming with lascivious passion.

"Stand back!" she cried, suddenly armed with the courage of despair. "I cannot—I will not submit to you this night. The demand is so sudden—so overwhelming—and then, I have suffered too so much anguish from other causes——But I swear — most solemnly, sacredly swear—that if you will only grant me the delay until that night when we shall meet on Westminster Bridge——"

"No!" exclaimed the Hangman; "not a day—not an hour—not a minute!"

"Then, by heaven!" cried Ernestina, darting to the bell-pull and seizing it in her hand; "I will not submit this night!"

There was something so resolute in her manner—wild and frenzied though it were—that Daniel Coffin was staggered; and it struck him that in the whirl of her agitated feelings she might alarm the whole house, thereby occasioning an exposure equally unprofitable and dangerous to them both. He accordingly began to cool down somewhat in his desires; and feeling the necessity of consenting to a compromise, he nevertheless, with characteristic greed, resolved that it should be one based upon immediate advantage to himself.

"Come—what will you give me to agree to your proposal?" he said, with a tone and manner full of sullen menace.

"There is my purse," replied Ernestina, still retaining her grasp upon the bell-rope with one hand and pointing with the other towards the toilette-table; "and you will find a few jewels in that box. Take them all—everything you fancy—and then leave me."

"But what security have I got," growled the Hangman, "that you will prove more condescending when we meet next Wednesday night?"

"Shall I not be as much in your power then," asked the lady, "as I am now? The relative circumstances of our position will not be changed: you can still threaten me—still coerce—still intimidate me;—but by that time I shall have brought my mind to view the thing with less horror, less aversion, and less disgust."

"Well—be it so," said the Hangman. "And now mind me—that when we meet next Wednesday night, I stand no more nonsense; but you shall go with me to some place where we can be comfortable together——"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Ernestina, her soul revolting from his words and looks down to its utter profundities. "I swear most solemnly — most sacredly—that I will do as you desire. But once more, I insist that you leave me now!"

"Well, well, I shan't stay much longer," rejoined Coffin, savagely: then advancing to the toilette-table, he helped himself to the purse and the jewels.

Having secured these spoils about his person, the ruffian unlocked the door—flung a parting look of deep and menacing meaning upon Ernestina, warning her not to forget her pledge—and then stole forth from the chamber. The lady retained her hold upon the bell-pull for nearly a minute: then, feeling satisfied that the dreadful man had indeed taken his departure, she hastened to re-lock the door — remaining alone, no longer with the excitement of bewildering thoughts, but in the cold, deep, immovable sternness of that resolve to which she had come.

CHAPTER CVII.

ST. JAMES'S PALACE.

In one of the earlier chapters of this work we have described Florence Eaton. About nineteen years of age — invested with a Madonna-like beauty, the innocence of which surrounded her as with a celestial halo—possessing a complexion of the purest white, dazzlingly transparent, and with the gentlest tint of the rose-leaf upon her cheeks—she was a being to whom the epithet of *angelic* may be applied. Her hair, of the lightest brown tinged with a golden hue, and seeming in the sunbeams to be of that precious shade which belongs to the silk when

gathered fresh from the silkworm, was worn in a profusion of ringlets falling upon her bright and polished shoulders. The tranquil lustre as well as the hue of heaven was in her eyes of soft azure: no coral was brighter than her lips;—no Grecian statue was ever chiselled with a more classical precision than that which marked her exquisite profile.

Then her shape—we have already described it as that of the sylph, blending perfection of symmetry with grace and elegance of carriage. The beautiful arching of the neck was of swan-like curvature: the bust, gently developed, was perfect in its virgin contours;—and as she walked, her form exhibited all the willowy elasticity of girlhood.

Gay and happy in her artless innocence was this charming creature: and in her liveliest moments her laugh came gushing forth so merrily melodious, that it seemed as if the teeth appearing between the parting coral of the lips, were themselves strings of musical pearls. Guile and deception were unknown to her: she was as ignorant of the duplicities, the falsities, and the artificialities of the world as the bird of paradise in its own genial clime is ignorant of the hail, the frost, the snow, and the ice of the hyperborean regions to the northward of inhospitable Labrador.

It may have chanced that the reader, while roving in a garden during the warm months when nature puts forth all the brightest and the best of her floral decorations, has observed a beautiful lily timidly revealing its virgin purity in the midst of all the most flaunting and gaudy occupants of the glowing parterres. That chaste and stainless lily seemed as it were out of place, unless for the purpose of contrast, by the side of full-blown peonies blushing their deepest red—groups of tulips displaying their variegated hues in all the pomp of their gaudy glory—the pinks drooping on their slender stalks—the marigolds vying with the bright yellow of the sun—the red roses expanding in all the pride belonging to Flora's cherished favourites—the glaring wall-flowers bright with their mingling yellow, warm sienna, and rich brown tints—the bluebells deep as the indigo seen in the hyacinth of India's plains—and all the other ornaments of the garden that force themselves most obtrusively upon the gaze. The eye, therefore, when contemplating such a scene, and when intoxicated with the blaze of beauty belonging to all that floral pomp, has settled at last with a feeling of relief and with a touching interest upon that fair, chaste, and modest lily appearing in the midst of such overwhelming gaud and grandeur. Apply this illustration to the world of fashion; and if amidst the brilliant galaxy of splendid Duchesses, exquisite Marchionesses, superb Countesses, and magnificent ladies of all grades and degrees of aristocratic rank, you behold one charming, retiring, and unsophisticated girl scarcely conscious of her own beauty, and calculated to please and interest the eye—not to dazzle and overwhelm the senses,—then have you found your lily amongst your flaunting, gaudy pageantry of flowers. And such was Florence Eaton!

Four or five days had elapsed after the incidents contained in the few last chapters; and it was about noon, when Lady Florimel said to her niece, "My dear Florence, I think that I have a little treat in store for you to-day."

"What is it, my dear aunt?" inquired the beauteous girl, gazing up with a smiling countenance from the embroidery in which she was engaged.

"You know, my dear girl," replied Pauline, "that her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia was here a few days ago, and likewise again yesterday. Amongst other things the Princess said to me, was that if ever you should feel inclined to visit the State Apartments at St. James's Palace ——"

"Oh! indeed I should be delighted," exclaimed Florence: "for inasmuch as you have an objection to attending the levees which the Prince of Wales sometimes holds there, and as you do not wish me to be presented at Court, I shall have no opportunity of seeing those superb apartments unless privately as you propose."

"And do you wish to be presented at Court?" asked Lady Florimel, gazing earnestly and not without some little feeling of uneasiness upon her lovely niece.

"Oh! no," exclaimed the artless girl, her silver voice as expressive of sincerity as were her innocent looks. "You have taught me to regard all regal splendour and princely show as being not only valueless, but also inconsistent with the true spirit of the age; and I can assure you, my dear aunt, that I am not faithless to your admirable teachings."

"Then you are my own dear girl!" said Pauline, infinitely relieved by this answer. "But to return to what we were ere now saying, I propose to take you at once to St. James's Palace, to pass an hour with the Princess and visit the State Apartments. Hasten and achieve your toilette—the carriage is ordered for half-past twelve."

"And do not you mean to accompany us, my dear uncle?" asked Florence, approaching Lord Florimel, who was seated on the sofa reading the newspaper.

"No, dear Florence," he replied, with a smile. "The Princess has invited you ladies in so cordial and friendly a manner, that the presence of one of the sterner sex would be a constraint upon the interesting *coterie*. And therefore I am excluded."

Florence, satisfied with this answer, hastened away to her own apartment to prepare for the visit; and the moment she had quitted the drawing-room, Pauline said to her husband, "Do you not think, Gabriel, that you had better accompany us after all?"

"If you wish it, my dear Pauline," was the reply, as the nobleman gazed affectionately upon his handsome wife. "But I think that I have already convinced you it would be more becoming for yourself to accompany Florence alone. In that cold reserve which you may exhibit towards the Prince, Florence will see naught save the distant respect which a lady would naturally show in the presence of his Royal Highness. But were I to find myself in the company of the Prince, I could scarcely manifest even the most ordinary politeness. For though years and years have passed since the date of poor Octavia's wrongs, and also of the base outrages which he dared—though so fruitlessly—attempt towards yourself, yet is the memory of them immortal with me! All things considered, therefore, you would do well to go alone with Florence. Besides, you say that although the Princess Sophia will not be present at the interview, yet she

has promised that the Master of her Household shall attend upon you——"

"Oh! it was not through any fear that I proposed you should accompany us," exclaimed Pauline. "Even were his Royal Highness inclined to renew towards me, either by word or look, the insults of bygone times, the presence of his daughter would assuredly prove an adequate check. Or else," added Pauline in a more serious tone, "must he indeed be far, far more depraved than *we* even know him to be."

Lady Florimel now retired to perform the little requisites of her own toilette, and at half-past twelve her ladyship and Florence stepped into the carriage. In a few minutes they were set down at St. James's Palace—that dingy, rambling, ignoble-looking old brick building the exterior of which has the appearance of a tumbling-down barrack, but upon whose interior hundreds and thousands of pounds have been expended to minister to the extravagance, the pomp, and the parade of Royalty. Poor unfortunate working classes! how have ye been doomed to the most crushing toil in order to furnish forth the splendour of those palaces which exist as the trophies of that tyranny which has achieved your wretchedness and slavery!

On alighting at St. James's Palace, Lady Florimel and the Honourable Miss Eaton were received by Sir Robert Conway, the Master of the Princess Sophia's Household. This gentleman was about sixty years of age—of courtly appearance—and one who had spent all his life as a hanger-on of Royalty. He had passed through all those grades of aristocratic flunkeyism which belong to the hierarchy of Royal Households—having gradually risen from Page of the Back Stairs, through the various phases of Page of the Front Stairs, Silver Stick, Gold Stick, Groom of the Stole, and heaven knows what beside in the service of the King, until he settled down into the comfortable place which we now find him occupying about the person of the Princess Sophia.

Heavens! what annals of the Court were contained in this man's memory. All the cells of his brain were so many encyclopædias filled with Court anecdotes, intrigues, scandals, depravities, and scoundrelisms. How many villanies amongst proud nobles had he been the means of hushing up!—how many frailties on the part of high-born ladies had he been instrumental in veiling from the public eye! How many noble lords had he known who were the most ignoble rascals on the face of God's earth!—how many Maids of Honour had he seen in his time who were no maids at all!—how many gentlemen of the bed-chamber had he been acquainted with, whose private deeds were so ungentlemanly that even at Crockford's den of infamy they were scouted as blacklegs!—how many Ladies-in-Waiting had he known who were so unladylike as to prefer their husbands' grooms to their husbands themselves!—how many Royal Highnesses had he bowed to, who by their conduct deserved to have been styled Royal Basenesses!

Then, was he not also—this Sir Robert Conway—a veritable perambulating *Court Guide*—a peripatetic *Blue Book* of the Aristocracy? He knew everybody and everything in the spheres of the Court, High Life, and Fashion. Did anybody happen to say in his presence, "By the by, who did Lord Cranbury marry?"—he would immediately have the answer ready to fall from the tip of his tongue, to the effect, for example's sake, that "the Right Honourable Augustus Octavius Stanhope St. James, sixth Earl of Cranbury, married the Honourable Miranda Amelia Jacintha Constantina Arlington, third daughter of Fitz-allan Seymour Portman Aulet, third Baron Rochdale, who married Lady Eliza Alexandrina Catherina Marietta Berkeley." In all other Court and Aristocratic matters, even to the minutest details of pedigree and genealogy, was this Master of the Household equally well versed and precise: and for this reason he was considered in the highest circles to be one of the cleverest men in all England. Indeed, a professor of a hundred different languages, half-a-dozen sciences, and as many arts, would not have obtained half the repute for talent and learning that was enjoyed by this wretched humdrum on the strength of the most trumpery, worthless, and debasing kind of knowledge to which a man could possibly degrade his intellect.

This great personage it was who received Lady Florimel and Miss Florence Eaton as they alighted from their carriage at St. James's Palace; and he forthwith conducted them to a magnificent saloon belonging to the suite of apartments occupied by the Princess Sophia. On introducing the ladies into the presence of the Princess, Sir Robert Conway withdrew: and her Royal Highness received her visitants with the kindest cordiality. Luncheon was immediately served: and when it was over, the Princess said, "Now, my dear Lady Florimel, I will summon Sir Robert Conway to escort you and your sweet niece to the State Apartments: but as I myself am somewhat indisposed, I hope you will excuse me from accompanying you."

The Master of the Household was accordingly sent for; and he speedily made his appearance—all bowings and scrapings, smiles and willingness—to conduct the ladies whithersoever they chose. Accordingly, Lady Florimel and Florence accompanied him to the State Apartments, which we shall not pause to describe: much less shall we linger to chronicle one single word of all the encomia which Sir Robert Conway lavished upon every feature of those rooms. Suffice it to say that Florence, in the artless simplicity of her character and with that natural good taste which had been fostered by her aunt, was much disappointed at finding far more of gingerbread tinsel than of sterling decorations, and much more gilding and gaudiness than works of art and masterpieces of the limner's pencil.

Having finished the inspection of the State Apartments, Sir Robert Conway, who had already received his cue from the Princess Sophia, proposed to introduce the ladies to an apartment well known as the King's Closet. This room was the one where the British Sovereigns were wont to transact private business on the occasion of Levees, Drawing Rooms, &c., held at St. James's Palace; and in that apartment many of the most diabolical laws and decrees have at different times received the royal signature.

Into this room did the Master of the Household now conduct Lady Florimel and Florence Eaton.

Pauline, who knew what was to happen, had some difficulty in concealing a certain amount of agitation and excitement which arose from the prospect of the interview that was now close at hand. As for Florence—totally unsuspecting whom she was about to meet, she followed her aunt in gay and cheerful confidence: but when Sir Robert Conway, on throwing open the door, exclaimed, "Good heavens! what have I done? the Prince Regent is here!"—the lovely girl trembled all over at the sudden idea of finding herself face to face with his Royal Highness. Oh! if she had only known—if she had only entertained the slightest scintillation of a suspicion that the Prince was in reality her father—the author of her being,—how different would have been her emotions, how far more solemnly and pathetically interesting this hour of her life!

As a matter of course, Sir Robert Conway affected to be overwhelmed with confusion in observing the Prince Regent in the Royal Closet: Pauline likewise stepped back a few paces, but with a really natural recoil from the destroyer of her sister, and not with any affected surprise or alarm—while her young, timid, and beautiful niece clung to her arm in vague terror lest this intrusion on their part should be visited by some unpleasant remonstrance.

The Prince, who as a matter of course through prearrangement had been located in the Royal Closet, now stepped forward, and with that easy yet elegant assurance which characterized him, at once exclaimed, "Do not be alarmed, my dear Conway! I presume you have brought these ladies hither to view the apartment: and they shall not be disappointed."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the courtly Conway, with a low bow, "Lady Florimel and her niece the Honourable Miss Eaton will present their duty to your Royal Highness."

Pauline bowed with a matron's dignity, accompanied by a due amount of respectful courtesy; and Florence, recovering her presence of mind at the reassuring words of the Prince, made a graceful salutation. This homage on the part of the ladies was acknowledged by what the Court newsman would call "the most gracious condescension" on the part of the Prince. At the same he flung upon Pauline a look which seemed to say, "I hope there is no longer any ill-feeling between us:" and then his eyes settled upon his lovely, angelic, blushing daughter—that daughter who knew not that she thus stood in her father's presence! But at the same moment—as he beheld that heavenly creature whose charms so far transcended all the representations which rumour had wafted to his ears, and on whose pure and candid brow chastity sate enthroned in alabaster, while vestal innocence beamed in her azure eyes as the sunlight shines in the clear blue of heaven,—as the Prince, we say, thus gazed upon that sweet ethereal creature, he experienced the father's pride—the parent's joy;—and in a moment of uncontrollable and ineffable feeling, he drew forth a small case enclosing the miniature of Octavia—the injured, wronged, and perished mother of that lovely girl!

Florence surveyed the Prince with the utmost surprise as she witnessed this proceeding; and Pauline, instantly stepping a pace backward, so as to get behind Florence, made a rapid and impatient sign to the Prince to warn him of the imprudence of his conduct and chide him for this demonstration of feeling which under the circumstances he ought to have avoided. As for Sir Robert Conway, *he* stood drawn up in an attitude of attention—but, courtier-like and also child-like, prepared to hear, see, and say nothing.

Perhaps it was one of the few fine moments of the Prince's life, when he thus became suddenly pliant and ductile to the influence of a father's feelings, and forgetting the necessity of caution, acknowledged the spontaneous sway of nature over the colder sentiment of prudence. It was one of the very few pathetic chapters in his history: and even Pauline, while signalling him to beware what he did, could not help thinking to herself, "This is at least some atonement made to the memory of my deceased sister!"

Scarcely had the Prince yielded to that sudden and irresistible impulse which thus made him draw forth the miniature portrait of the long-dead Octavia, in order to compare it with the living beauty that was now in his presence,—when the amazed and even startled look which Florence fixed upon him reminded him of his imprudence, even before he observed the signs which Lady Florimel was making. No sooner, therefore, had he opened that case and glanced upon that miniature—no sooner indeed had his eyes travelled from the features of the mother as perpetuated by the limner's art, to those of the daughter brilliant with the animation of youthful life,—when he closed the case again; and returning it to his pocket, instantaneously took the hand of Florence, saying, "Pardon me, young lady—pardon me—but you suddenly reminded me of a dear friend now no more!"

Florence became overwhelmed with confusion—almost with dismay: for she felt that the Prince's hand trembled nervously as he held her own—and there was something so peculiar, so touching, so appealing at the moment in his looks, that she experienced the strangest and most unaccountable feeling springing up in her heart. It was as if all in a moment she became deeply interested in this Prince whom she had never seen before. But, Ah! little did she suspect that it was nature asserting its empire within her gentle bosom, and influencing her with those promptings that were so mysterious, so inscrutable, and so profound!

"Permit us to retire, sir," now interjected Lady Florimel, fearful that the scene might go to such a length as to excite suspicion in the mind of Florence and render some explanation indispensable for the purpose of allaying it.

"Lady Florimel," said the Prince, fixing his looks upon her in a peculiar manner, "I hope that your noble husband and yourself will some day favour the reception-rooms at Carlton House with your presence, and that you will be accompanied by your amiable niece?"

Pauline bowed, but gave no reply: then taking the hand of Florence, she whispered hastily, "Let us withdraw."

The young lady's thoughts were thrown into such confusion by the Prince's manner, the words he had addressed to her, and the emotions which they had suddenly conjured up, that she scarcely knew what she was doing: but mechanically making a graceful salutation, she suffered her aunt to lead her from the room. Sir Robert Conway followed; and when they reached the Princess

Sophia's apartment, Florence was so overcome by the powerful yet unaccountable agitation of her feelings, that she burst into tears. Lady Florimel threw a rapid glance upon the Princess, as much as to say, "Did I not prophecy some such result as this?"—and her Royal Highness shook her head to express her regret that she should have been the means of bringing about this interview between the father and the daughter.

"My dear girl," said Pauline, in the kindest and most soothing manner to Florence, "what afflicts you thus? what feeling causes these tears?"

"Pardon me, my dear aunt," murmured Florence, hastily wiping her eyes; "and intercede on my behalf that her Royal Highness shall forgive me this foolish conduct of mine in her presence. But I could not help it! Some feeling came over me, stronger than myself—a feeling for which I could not account at the time, and which I am still less able to explain now. It was a temporary weakness—a transitory depression of spirits—produced, most probably, by that sudden excitement which seemed to take possession of his Royal Highness the Prince. But I feel better now: indeed I am quite recovered—and again do I implore your pardon."

"You have not offended us, my dear girl," said the Princess Sophia, rising from her seat and taking the young maiden's hand in the kindest manner.

To be brief, Florence Eaton speedily recovered her wonted cheerfulness; and in a short time a footman entered to announce that the carriage had arrived. Lady Florimel and her niece resumed their bonnets and scarves, took leave of the Princess, and entered the carriage, which Pauline ordered to drive round Hyde Park ere returning home.

While proceeding to that fashionable lounge maintained by the people's money to enable the Aristocracy of London to display their gorgeous equipages and sumptuous apparel, Florence continued to discourse upon the singular incidents of the meeting in the Royal Closet. She expressed her pity for the Prince who had been so deeply moved at *having the features of a lost friend recalled to his memory;* and with a natural artlessness she observed that any one who could be so moved, must possess a very excellent disposition. Pauline was vexed to hear her talk in this manner: for she saw that the incident had made a deep impression upon the young maiden's mind, and she did not wish any occurrence to disturb the even tenour of that existence which had hitherto passed in such serene and tranquil happiness. Moreover, Pauline was naturally fearful of her niece obtaining any clue to the discovery of the secret of her birth: for sad—Oh! sad indeed would it be for this innocent unsophisticated child of nature to have her mind enlightened as to the past and be taught the history of a mother's shame!

The carriage had entered Hyde Park; and Lady Florimel was thinking how she should turn the conversation into another channel, when suddenly loud cries of alarm burst from the lips of several persons walking on the footways on either side of the road; and at the same instant the coachman reined in his horses abruptly. But a crash simultaneously occurred: fresh ejaculations of terror were heard—the horses of Lady Florimel's carriage were plunging violently—and several people were rushing to the spot. Pauline and Florence, greatly affrighted, looked forth from the windows; and the cause of the stoppage, confusion, and alarming cries was immediately apparent. A gentleman driving a magnificent horse in a gig, had found the animal all in a moment become unmanageable, shying at a white pocket handkerchief which somebody had let fall and which was blowing across the road. Thus suddenly swerving aside, the spirited steed had come in furious collision with the horses of Lady Florimel's carriage. The gig was upset—the gentleman was thrown out and either killed upon the spot, or stunned—and the maddened animal dashed away fleet as an arrow, dragging the vehicle like a thing of no weight behind him.

Such was the incident which occurred all in a moment to turn the thoughts alike of Pauline and Florence into a new channel. The footman who stood behind the carriage, instantaneously leaped down and joined those persons who had rushed to the spot to render their assistance. The gentleman, on being raised from the ground, was discovered to have been only stunned—not killed. The footman, stepping up to the carriage-window, reported this intelligence to Pauline, who at once directed that the gentleman should be lifted into the chariot. But who was he? No one on the spot at the moment knew him: it was therefore impossible to convey him to his own residence—and Pauline commanded the carriage to proceed home to Florimel House in Piccadilly.

A few minutes brought the equipage thither; and the gentleman, who still remained insensible, was lifted into the mansion—conveyed to a chamber—and surrounded by all possible attentions. Medical aid was procured; and in a short time the sufferer was somewhat restored to consciousness—but not sufficiently to speak: and the physicians, while declaring that no fatal result need be dreaded, nevertheless desired that he should be kept perfectly tranquil, as he had evidently received a severe shock from the fall.

When the first excitement attending this incident had somewhat subsided, Lord Florimel bethought himself of searching the stranger's pockets for the purpose of ascertaining, if possible, who he was—as his relations or friends might be uneasy at his absence. His card-case was found: and thence was it discovered that the handsome young invalid—for both good-looking and youthful he assuredly was, as we might have observed before—was Mr. Malvern of Hanover Square.

CHAPTER CVIII.

THE PRINCESS CHARLOTTE.

SCARCELY had Lady Florimel's carriage rolled out of the court-yard of St. James's Palace, when another equipage, drawn by four horses, dashed into the enclosure. The royal arms were upon the panels of this magnificent barouche: the postilions were clad in elegant jockey-attire of sky-blue; and three tall footmen in the royal liveries stood behind the carriage.

The moment this equipage appeared, great excitement immediately became visible amongst all

the officials, lacqueys, and dependants who had previously been lounging about in the court-yard and entrance-hall of the palace. But now two lines of bowing individuals were speedily formed from the carriage-door to the entrance of the building; and Sir Robert Conway, who came hurrying forward, arrived just in time to assist a young lady to alight. Then, with profound respect and veneration, the old courtier offered this young lady his arm, which she took with unaffected ease and affability of manner,—acknowledging with a graceful inclination of her head the low bows made by the two lines of dependants, as she passed between them into the palace. Three ladies-in-waiting likewise descended from the carriage and followed close behind their youthful mistress: for this young lady who has just arrived at St. James's Palace, and whom we now for the first time introduce to our readers, is the Princess Charlotte, the daughter of the Prince Regent and the injured Caroline of Brunswick!

Strange coincidence! that on the same day, at the same hour, and within a few minutes of each other, the illegitimate daughter of the Prince Regent—namely, Florence Eaton—and his legitimate daughter, the Princess Charlotte, should thus visit St. James's Palace!

And here we must pause for a little space to describe her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte, who was now just eighteen years of age. Handsome she was, assuredly,—yet not endowed with that sweet, nymph-like, and angelic beauty which characterized Florence Eaton; but invested with that peculiar style of loveliness—sleepy, luxuriant, and sensuous—which has already been described in an earlier chapter as distinctive of the females belonging to the family of Guelph. Her figure, even at this early age, was already of a richness merging upon embonpoint—but not sufficiently so to diminish its graces. There was however a voluptuousness in its contours which was enhanced by the complete exposure of the shoulders and neck, according to the fashion of the time. Short of stature, the Princess had little of girlhood's suppleness and lightness of movement: her slow pace and matron-like gait arose not from any idea of maintaining a dignified bearing, but from the circumstance that in her nature she was what Byron has described as "somewhat languishing and lazy."

Her hair—of a light chestnut, soft as silk and fine in its individual filaments—was far from profuse in quantity, and was worn in frizzly ringlets at the sides, but carelessly gathered up in a knot behind the head. Her complexion was beautifully fair, with an animated bloom upon the cheeks, making them resemble in their healthful plumpness the ripe peach with its mingled damask and vermeil. Her features could not be called regular nor yet classical; and they were also too large and striking for a delicate beauty—the nose being prominent, the lips full and sensuous,—and the chin rounded with the boldness belonging to a profile that indicates strong passions. Her eyes were of a light blue, and looked soft, languishing, and even wanton from beneath their drooping lids: the eyebrows were light, and indeed too delicately pencilled to give a classic finish to the opal of the temples.

To judge more minutely still of the character of the Princess Charlotte from the usual physical indications, we may add that benevolence, generosity, and goodness of heart were in her looks: while an occasional bridling up of the head, a quick flashing of the eye from the midst of its languid expression, and a sudden flushing of the countenance, showed that she possessed a temper impatient of contradiction and which in time might even become overbearing and despotic.

We have said that her Royal Highness was attired in a very low dress: but as a matter of course it was not with her shoulders and bosom thus exposed that she had arrived in the carriage. An elegant scarf was thrown lightly over her neck; and a veil depended from the hat which she wore. This hat was of beaver, with large brims and black plumes; and being worn gracefully, it suited well the somewhat bold and masculine style of her features.

On reaching the landing that communicated with the apartments of the Princess Sophia, the Princess Charlotte quitted the arm of Sir Robert Conway, and passed into a dressing-room, followed by her ladies-in-waiting. There she laid aside her splendid hat and her elegant scarf of purple velvet with its gold fringe; and dispensing with the attendance of her ladies, she proceeded alone to the apartment where the Princess Sophia was seated. The meeting between the aunt and the niece was most affectionate; and when they had exchanged the usual greetings, the Princess Charlotte requested Sophia to dismiss her ladies who were in attendance. This was immediately done; and the royal aunt and niece remained alone together.

We must here observe that for some years past the Princess Charlotte had not resided with her father the Prince Regent: she dwelt principally with the King and Queen at Windsor or Frogmore. That is to say, she was in reality under the protection of old Queen Charlotte, his Majesty George III being at the time a hopeless lunatic. The young Princess did not often repair to London, save when in the company of the Queen: but occasionally she would make a special trip to St. James's Palace, to visit her aunts who had apartments there; and it was often observed in courtly circles, rumoured throughout the West End, and even hinted at times by the newspaper-press, that on such occasions her Royal Highness very seldom called at Carlton House, but saw her father the Prince Regent at St. James's. We may add that of all the Royal Family the Princess Sophia was Charlotte's favourite relative; and to this much-loved aunt was she wont to confide all her cares, anxieties, and troubles.

Not many days had elapsed since the Princess Charlotte had paid Sophia one of these flying visits to which we have alluded: and therefore her appearance at St. James's after so brief an interval, and the request which she now made for the dismissal of the waiting-ladies from the room—added to a certain pre-occupation which was visible in her manner—convinced Sophia that something unpleasant had occurred.

"My dear Charlotte," accordingly said the aunt, the moment her ladies had quitted the apartment; "has any thing happened to cause you fresh uneasiness?"

"Oh! my dear aunt," exclaimed the young Princess, bursting into tears; "how can I tell you what has

occurred? how can I wound your heart so deeply as to speak ill of that mother whom I know you love so fondly?"

"Tell me everything, my dear niece," said the Princess Sophia; "and do not regard my feelings at all. Tell me what has happened! You know that I would do anything to serve you. But come, dry these tears! Should any one enter unexpectedly and see you weeping——"

"Oh! let me weep—let me weep, my dear aunt!" cried the Princess Charlotte, now literally wringing her hands in anguish. "These tears afford a vent for that sorrow which would otherwise cause my heart to burst. For, Oh! this pent-up affliction which circumstances so often compel me to restrain, seems at times to become a consuming flame and to prey upon my very vitals——"

"Heavens! dear Charlotte," cried the Princess Sophia, now very seriously alarmed: "I know that you grieve on account of your mother—but never, never have I heard you speak so despondingly as at present! Surely, surely something terrible has happened——"

"Yes—something terrible indeed!" interrupted the Princess: "something of so grave and so serious a nature that I question whether I shall ever return to Windsor again—whether indeed I shall not steal out of England in disguise, and hasten to join my poor dear persecuted mother in Italy!"

"For God's sake, compose yourself, dearest Charlotte!" said the Princess Sophia, in the most soothing manner possible. "Instead of giving way to this painful excitement, tell me what has occurred—favour me with your confidence, as you have hitherto been wont to do—allow me to give you my advice, and promise me that you will follow it."

"But how will you advise me against your own mother?" exclaimed the young Princess impetuously.

"If my mother be acting wrongly," was the mild and gently remonstrative answer, "I will not scruple to condemn her proceedings as candidly and impartially as I would those of an utter stranger. Far more readily, then, would I protect *you*, my beloved niece, against even the machinations of my own mother—if such machinations were in progress!"

"Pardon me—pardon me, dearest aunt!" exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, with a gush of fervid feeling and grateful enthusiasm: "pardon me, I say, for having mistrusted you for a moment—but I felt at the time as if there were no longer any confidence to be bestowed on a single being upon earth!"

"Tell me, Charlotte," said the Princess Sophia, "what it is that has affected you so painfully—so profoundly."

"I will endeavour to restrain my feelings in such a manner," answered the young Princess, "as to enable me to give you a calm and intelligible narrative of what has occurred. You know that at Windsor Castle I have free access on all occasions to the Queen's private apartments, and that it is never considered necessary for me to send and announce my intention of visiting her Majesty in her own room. You are likewise aware that her Majesty is particularly fond at this time of the year, when the weather is so cold, of sitting in the little room which she calls *the boudoir*, and which has double doors. Well, at about eleven o'clock this forenoon I repaired as usual to pay my respects to her Majesty, forgetting to ask previously whether she was alone. On reaching the boudoir, I found the outer door ajar—and perhaps you remember how noiselessly it opens? Certain it is that when I opened it the sound could not have been heard inside the room; for the voices that were in conversation did not cease speaking. On hearing those voices, and recognizing one to be the Queen's, I was immediately on the point of retiring, under the impression that her Majesty was engaged, when something which fell from her lips suddenly transfixed me to the spot. The words were to this effect:—'*But, my dear Mrs. Owen, we have gone too far to retreat: the ruin of the Princess Caroline is resolved upon; it must be accomplished—and I am determined that she shall never, never have a chance of being Queen of England.*'—Oh! as these dreadful syllables met mine ears, a cold tremor seized upon me—I shivered violently from head to foot, and should have fallen had I not actually clung to the door-post for support. Then with a mighty effort I so far conquered my emotions as to remain an eager, breathless listener. It was now Mrs. Owen—a name I had sometimes heard before—who spoke. '*I am well aware,*' she said, '*of the truth of your Majesty's observation, that we have gone much too far to retreat: but what I dread is exposure—and this alarm I entertain not merely for my own sake, but that of every one implicated in the business. That meddling young man's escape from the agents of the French Prefect*——' Here the Queen interrupted Mrs. Owen, exclaiming, '*You are sure that the intelligence is correct?*'—'*Beyond all possibility of doubt,*' replied Mrs. Owen: '*here is the letter which the Prefect of Police in Paris has written to the Marquis of Leveson acquainting him with all that is known of the rescue and escape.*'—Then as I still remained spellbound at the threshold of the boudoir, I could hear the rustling of a paper, as of a letter being opened; and then a pause ensued in the conversation, so that I felt assured the Queen was reading the letter which Mrs. Owen appeared to have put into her hands. Wherefore did I not fly from that spot? Oh! cannot you comprehend the terrible nature of that curiosity which thus retained me there? And now I was shivering with a chill no longer, but trembling with a burning fever; for the blood was pouring like molten lead through my veins. Eagerly, intensely did I listen to catch the next words that might be uttered. At length the Queen spoke again. She had evidently finished the perusal of the letter. '*Who could have been the authors of that rescue?*' she said, in the quick, sharp, querulous tone which she adopts when labouring under apprehension or annoyance. '*You see,*' she continued, '*it is quite clear from the report made by the police agents to the Prefect, that the plot must have been deeply laid, and that they were Englishmen who accomplished the rescue. Who could they have been?*'—'*That is the mystery, and likewise the source of alarm,*' observed Mrs. Owen. '*Certain it is that there are now several people who are acquainted with the whole plot which we have been conducting for years past: for of course the self-styled Jocelyn Lofius did not fail to tell everything to his friends after his rescue, even if they did not know all particulars before.*'—'*Which was most probable,*' added the

Queen, in a still more bitter tone of vexation: '*or else how could they have known he was a prisoner under such circumstances? and wherefore should they have attempted to rescue him? What can have become of him?*'—Mrs. Owen, in reply, proceeded to remind the Queen that this young man whom they called Jocelyn Loftus, was engaged to be married to a young lady named Louisa Stanley, residing at Canterbury; and it appears also from what Mrs. Owen said, that her youngest daughter—Mary by name—is staying with that same Miss Stanley. '*I have allowed Mary,*' observed Mrs. Owen, '*to remain there unmolested, because she is buried in a seclusion where she has no opportunity of revealing our secrets in a manner calculated to do us any more harm than she has already done.*' Mrs. Owen likewise proceeded to observe that she hated her youngest daughter and should never again be able to bear the sight of her, '*because she had proved so disobedient.*' But heavens! my dear aunt, in what think you that this disobedience consisted?"

"I know not, my dear Charlotte," returned the Princess Sophia, who had listened with a profoundly mournful interest to the preceding narrative. "Pray continue: this is indeed a dreadful recital!"

"Dreadful!" echoed the Princess Charlotte, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes and assuming a forced composure. "From the conversation which ensued between Mrs. Owen and the Queen, I learnt that for years past a fearful conspiracy has been in existence—a conspiracy——My God! for what object?——Oh! to accomplish the ruin of my poor mother! In this conspiracy the Queen, three or four noblemen, several titled ladies, and this Mrs. Owen have been leagued: and what is worse—Oh! ten thousand times worse—my father the Prince Regent is deep in that same conspiracy against his own wife! Aye and

more too——Alas! my dear aunt that I should have to afflict you by these communications: but to *you* alone can I confide my sorrows—from *you* alone can I expect sympathy! I have named some of the conspirators: but in addition to the list, I must specify my two uncles, the Dukes of——"

And here the voice of the young Princess was lost in sobs as she murmured the two names.

"O heavens! this is terrible—terrible!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, clasping her hands.

"Now you can understand my sorrow, and you can sympathise with me!" said the unhappy young Princess Charlotte. "That I should be compelled thus to speak to you concerning your own mother and your brothers——"

"Is scarcely so dreadful," interrupted the Princess Sophia, "as for *you*, my dear niece, to have learnt so much evil of your own father! But pray proceed. Frightful as the narrative is, I am nevertheless impelled by a mournful interest to hear it all."

"I have already told you," resumed the Princess Charlotte, "that this conspiracy has been progressing for years. You are aware—of course you are—that in 1806 certain grave and serious charges were made against my poor mother. I was only ten years of age at the time, and was too young to know what was going on: but still I knew, even *then*, that my poor mother was unhappy—for when taken to see her at Blackheath, I noticed—child as I was—that she cried bitterly, very bitterly! You know, my dear aunt, that the charges made against her at the time of which I am speaking, all fell to the ground: not one could be maintained—they were the basest fabrications—the vilest inventions of calumny! This I have of course learnt only within the last few years: but it was reserved for this day's incident to reveal to me the astounding fact that those charges, made against my poor mother in 1806, resulted from the schemes of the conspirators whom I have named!"

"Oh! surely you must be labouring under some terrible misapprehension?" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, contemplating her niece in dismay.

"No: all that I am telling you did I glean from the discourse which took place between the Queen and Mrs. Owen this morning. But that is not all," exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, with another powerful and painful effort to subdue a passionate outburst of those feelings that were struggling to find a vent. "At this present moment Mrs. Owen's three eldest daughters are engaged in carrying out the schemes of the conspirators: and it is because the youngest daughter Mary recoiled in horror from the same detestable service when it was proposed to her—it is for this reason that she is hated by her mother, rendered homeless, and made dependent on the generosity of that Miss Louisa Stanley whose name I have already mentioned. Oh! you perceive, my dear aunt, that this morning has been fraught with terrible revelations for me! And can you wonder if I ere now expressed a doubt whether I would ever return to Windsor again—or whether I would not quit England, repair to Italy, and not only warn my beloved mother of the perils which surround her, but likewise remain with her henceforth to sooth and solace her?"

"No—you must not leave England, my dear niece," said the Princess Sophia. "Such a course could only lead to a scandal and an exposure that might involve the whole Royal Family in utter ruin. You have sought my advice, and you shall have it: you shall have my best assistance also—but believe me, the utmost caution and circumspection must be used. Tell me however whether anything farther took place between Mrs. Owen and my mother this morning, and how their interview terminated."

"Mrs. Owen reminded her Majesty, as I just now said," resumed the Princess Charlotte, "of the circumstance that the young gentleman whom they spoke of as Jocelyn Loftus was engaged to be married to that Miss Louisa Stanley with whom Mary Owen is staying at Canterbury. Mrs. Owen therefore suggested that it was very probable Jocelyn Loftus, on his escape from the hands of the French authorities, would fly back to England and hasten to convince his beloved Louisa of his safety. That he would take this step instead of hurrying on to Italy, Mrs. Owen suggested as more than probable; and the Queen appeared to fall into the same view of the matter. They therefore buoyed themselves up with this hope: and from some farther remarks which they made, it seems as if they cared not if Jocelyn Loftus should content himself with merely writing a warning letter to my dear mother in Italy, inasmuch as my mother is so completely surrounded by the creatures and tools of the conspirators, that the correspondence addressed to her is subjected to the most rigid scrutiny, and all letters calculated to open her eyes to the dangers of her position, are carefully suppressed."

"I could not have believed my mother capable of such wickedness," said the Princess Sophia, terribly afflicted and profoundly humiliated at being thus compelled to listen to the recital of a parent's iniquities.

"'Tis, alas! all too true," observed the Princess Charlotte. "And, Oh!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears, "how shall I ever be able to meet my father again, otherwise than to overwhelm him with reproaches for his conduct towards my mother? For observe, my dear aunt," she cried, suddenly wiping away her tears, and evidently deriving solace from the thought which had just struck her and to which she was about to give utterance,—"not once, throughout that long conversation which I overheard this morning, did either the Queen or Mrs. Owen venture to impute a single crime to my poor mother! On the contrary, it is because the conspirators know her to be virtuous that they are compelled to invent imputations against her and suborn perjurers to weave the meshes of circumstantial evidence around her, in order to consummate her ruin. The mere existence of this conspiracy, without even all the frightful details that have come to my knowledge, would be sufficient to prove my mother's innocence and virtue. Then wherefore is she thus persecuted? why have I been for years separated from her? At first, when I was a child, I was told that it was not consistent with my rank as lineal heiress to the throne to be brought up under my parents' care; and knowing no better, but believing what I was told, I repined not. But as I grew up, misgivings relative to the truth of those represen-

tations entered my mind; and as you are well aware, my dear aunt, I have for the last two or three years been much afflicted—much grieved—not only at being separated from both my parents, but also because they themselves are separated! You know," added the Princess Charlotte with the fervid eloquence of feelings deeply moved, "that such have been my griefs!"

"I know it, alas! too well," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, throwing her arms round the neck of her young and handsome niece. "I know it, my beloved Charlotte—for you have poured forth all your woes into my bosom, and I have done my best to console you!"

"Yes—you have been a dear fond relative to me," replied the royal niece, affectionately returning the aunt's caresses. "How often have you sustained my drooping spirit! and how valuable have been your lessons, in teaching me the necessity of assuming a demeanour calculated to prevent the giddy throng of rank and fashion from conjecturing how painful were the gnawings of affliction at my heart's core! But this is not the time and these are not the circumstances," she suddenly exclaimed, "for me to give way to grief. I must study how to act for the best—and you, my dear aunt, must counsel me."

"But you have not told me all that occurred in the Queen's boudoir?" remarked Sophia.

"Oh! these frequent interruptions which the gush of feeling occasions!" cried the Princess Charlotte. "The discourse between her Majesty and Mrs. Owen was long and serious—embracing so many points that it gave me the completest insight into the whole conspiracy. But they resolved upon nothing definite—unless it were to ascertain without delay whether the young gentleman whom they called Jocelyn Loftus, be really at Canterbury or not. At length Mrs. Owen rose to depart; and I fled away from the vicinage of the boudoir. Hastening to my own apartments, I ordered the carriage—dressed myself in a hurry—and came direct from Windsor to St. James's, to consult with you, my best friend and kindest relative!"

"I have already urged the absolute necessity of prudence and caution," said the Princess Sophia. "Unfortunately, my dear Charlotte, the monarchical institutions of this country are becoming unpopular with the great mass of the people. The establishment of a Republic in North America and the tremendous impulse given to liberal ideas by the French Revolution, have set the millions a-thinking in this country. The consequence is that Royalty is menaced on every side: its end is approaching—and those who are anxious to precipitate the catastrophe, rejoice in each new suicidal act which Royalty itself commits. Every crime, every vice, every frailty, every misdeed connected with Royalty that can be dragged forth by its enemies to the public eye, constitutes one of its suicidal acts and becomes a nail which it is knocking in its own coffin. It is not therefore for you, my dear Charlotte, to do aught to accelerate the ruin of that throne whereon you hope to sit: and hence the absolute necessity for caution — the utmost caution indeed, under present circumstances."

"But something must be done!" cried the young Princess, who had listened with the utmost impatience to her aunt's somewhat lengthened address. "I cannot suffer my poor mother to remain environed by these fearful perils. If I write to her a warning letter, it will be intercepted ——"

"An idea has struck me!" ejaculated the Princess Sophia. "It is evident that this Mr. Jocelyn Loftus is a generous-hearted, chivalrous young man—one who is resolved to become the champion of your mother against her enemies. Arguing from a knowledge of the human heart, it is indeed most probable that after his rescue from the French authorities, he has sped back to England to embrace his beloved Louisa and personally assure her of his safety. I will at all events write this very day to Canterbury ——"

"You will write to Mr. Loftus?" exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, eagerly and thankfully.

"Yes, I will write to him," resumed the royal aunt: "I will beseech him to come up to London at once and hold a conference with me—a conference at which you, my dear niece, shall be present;—and then we will settle some decisive plan for the protection of your dear mother against her enemies."

"Yes—this is the best course to pursue," exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, again flinging herself into Sophia's arms and embracing her affectionately. "Alas! alas!" she continued, the tears once more streaming down her cheeks; "sad—very sad is my poor mother's destiny! You must know, my dear aunt, that although everybody observes such caution when speaking in my hearing, there are nevertheless times when I cannot help catching things which were never meant to reach me: and sometimes, too, I glean from newspapers such strange allegations and unmistakable allusions——"

"Concerning whom, my dear girl?" demanded the Princess Sophia, anxiously.

"Concerning my own father, the Prince Regent of the Kingdom!" was the response, delivered with so profound a melancholy that it was evident the young Princess deeply felt the consciousness of her sire's profligacy. "I know many things which perhaps, at my age and in my position, I ought not to know," she continued. "I know, for instance, that during the long years which have elapsed since my father's separation from my mother, he has been leading a life which reflects no honour upon him as a parent, a husband, or a Prince. I know that many and many a titled dame belonging to the Royal Court, has been too intimate with him: and I know also that Lady Sackville is the present Royal Favourite at Carlton House, and that her will, if she choose to assert it, may not only become law there but also throughout the British empire. Can I wonder then, my dear aunt, to hear you tell me that Royalty is suffering in the estimation of the people of this country?"

"Would to heaven, my dear Charlotte," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, her own feelings now worked up to the most painful degree of excitement: for she felt—deeply, poignantly felt—that she herself was far from immaculate, and that the discovery of her dishonour had tended amongst other overwhelming misfortunes to render her own father, George III, a hopeless lunatic: "would to heaven that such topics as those to which you have alluded, had never been forced upon your thoughts! Oh! my dear niece, you are too young

—too good—to have such reflections thrust as it were upon your innocent contemplation——"

"Reflections which destroy all the innocence of the soul!" interrupted Charlotte bitterly. "Where is the generous confidence of my youthfulness? It is gone—gone—and never can be restored! Often do I think of those apples which grow upon the banks of the Dead Sea, and which though fair and beauteous to gaze upon, nevertheless contain naught but corruption and rottenness. May not the British Court be likened unto one of those deceptive fruits?—for, alas! my dear aunt, it is not concerning my father only that startling whispers have sometimes reached my ears and distressing allusions in the newspapers have met mine eyes, but there is scarcely a member of the Royal Family concerning whom I have not recently heard or read something calculated to shock or scare me!"

"Good heavens! what mean you, dear girl?" demanded the Princess Sophia, surveying her niece with terrified amazement: for knowing how many dreadful things might be told relative to her parents, her brothers, her sisters, and even herself, Sophia was naturally stricken with horrible suspense as to how much of all those fearful truths had come to the knowledge of her niece.

"Oh! wherefore should I annoy and distress you, my dear aunt, more than I have already done?" exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, now evidently chagrined at having made her last observation.

"But you *must* tell me, my dear child, what you have heard or read," said the Princess Sophia, earnestly and even entreatingly: "because I will candidly tell you how much is true and how much is false, of all that rumour circulates or that scandal loves to repeat."

"Yes—it is better that I should know how to discriminate between the true and false," said the young Princess, evidently appreciating the justice of the remark. "Heaven knows that the Royal History is already clouded enough, without the necessity of wilful exaggeration! I have heard then, my dear aunt," she continued, partially averting her blushing countenance, "that my deceased aunt, your well-beloved sister the Princess Amelia, died heartbroken from a blighted and dishonouring love——"

"No, no—it is not true—it is not true!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia; but her very manner convinced her niece that the tale *was* indeed too true. "What else have you heard, Charlotte?" demanded the aunt abruptly.

"Dreadful things connected with my uncle Ernest, the Duke of Cumberland," responded the young Princess hesitatingly. "I overheard the other day the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott conversing together about uncle Ernest and his late valet Sellis——"

"Oh! but this is the vilest of scandals!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, starting as if galvanised. "Come, my dear girl—we must talk no more upon the subject—you must think no more of them——"

"I will endeavour to forget them," rejoined the Princess Charlotte: but having taken her leave of her aunt, she continued to ponder deeply and painfully upon all these matters during her ride back to Windsor Castle.

CHAPTER CIX.

WESTMINSTER BRIDGE.

It was the Wednesday fixed for the appointment with Daniel Coffin on Westminster-bridge; and shortly after dusk the Prince Regent, muffled closely in a capacious mantle, and with a hat the slouching brims of which completely shaded his countenance, issued from the private gate of Carlton Palace that opened into St. James's Park. Passing rapidly along the Mall, he at length relaxed his pace; and on arriving opposite St. James's Palace he walked very slowly, in the evident expectation of meeting some one. The evening was dull and misty, and very few people were in the park: but presently a figure, with an unmistakable gait, emerged as it were from the surrounding gloom, and accosted his Royal Highness.

"Ah! it is you," ejaculated the Prince. "You are punctual: it is barely five o'clock."

"Why, your Royal Highness," observed the Hangman, "when I received such a pressing, and I may say a peremptory message as your valet brought me to-day, it wasn't likely I should go and neglect it."

"Well, well," interrupted the Prince; "you must talk as little and listen as patiently as you can, for I have something of the greatest importance to say to you. But before I proceed, let me tell you that if I know how to reward liberally I am equally aware how to punish severely; so that your fidelity shall be nobly recompensed, but any treachery on your part shall be ruthlessly punished."

"I don't at all object to such terms," remarked Coffin: "because I am too wise not to earn the reward—and I am not such a fool as to risk the punishment."

"I like deeds and not words," said the Prince: "and if I have given you this warning, it has not been without a reason. Wherefore did you go to Lady Ernestina Dysart and tell her that it was my intention to make her the bearer of the money to be paid to you this night?"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Hangman: "her ladyship told you that? But what else did she tell your Royal Highness?"

"She told me nothing," replied the Prince, "but what I presume was the truth: namely, that you insinuated yourself into Leveson House—that you found your way to her private chamber—and that you made her a monstrous proposal which I dare not name."

"And was this all Lady Ernestina told you?" inquired the Hangman, the sardonic leer which he gave being visible even in the deepening gloom of the hour.

"Was not that enough?" exclaimed the Prince, astonished at the question: "or would you have me understand that Lady Ernestina actually succumbed to your wishes?"

"No—I didn't mean anything of the sort," interrupted the Hangman, now satisfied that Ernestina had *not* mentioned to the Prince a word relative to the other incidents which had occurred on the same night at Leveson House: not that he would have cared if she had been more communicative on the subject, but he was merely curious to ascertain the point.

"There is something peculiar in your manner," said the Prince: "as if you fancied that Lady Ernestina revealed to me less than she might have done."

"Well," observed the Hangman, carelessly, "I only thought perhaps she might have told your Royal Highness that I got a few guineas out of her, and one or two little articles of jewellery that she gave me——"

"Of that no matter," interrupted the Prince: "it is your disposition as well as your calling to lay your hand on whatever comes in your way. But to cut all this matter short, I merely mention the fact of Lady Ernestina's calling privately upon me and communicating the particulars of your visit to her, in order to show you by your own actions that you cannot always keep a secret or behave prudently."

"Well, I admit I was wrong," observed the Hangman, affecting a contrite tone: "but as your Royal Highness had so positively said you meant to employ Lady Ernestina to bring the money to me at eleven o'clock to-night on Westminster Bridge, I didn't think there was any harm in just mentioning the fact to her, and I certainly did not expect that she would peach to you again——"

"Well, once more I say," ejaculated the Prince, impetuously, "you must listen and not talk—and you must beware in future how you open your lips to breathe my name to a soul. I know your character well: money is your god—gold is your idol; and you care not what you do or what happens as long as your avarice is gratified. Is it not so?"

"Your Royal Highness isn't far wrong," answered the Hangman with a chuckle.

"I knew it," observed the Prince laconically. "And now, therefore, I am going this evening to tempt you with quantities of gold—indeed to line your pockets so effectually with the precious metal that, if I mistake not, you will be the happiest man in existence. In the first place, I give you at once the five hundred guineas which were to have been handed over to you to-night at eleven o'clock——"

"Ah! then that appointment is not to be kept?" ejaculated Coffin, as he clutched the heavy bag of chinking gold which the Prince gave him as he spoke.

"Listen and interrupt me not," continued his Royal Highness. "You have the five hundred guineas which I promised you: now I wish to know whether you will earn another five hundred by performing the service I am about to specify?"

"I'd hang my own mother for such a sum, if she was alive," answered Coffin, eagerly.

"Then if you would so willingly dispose of your parent," exclaimed the Prince, "you will have no objection to surrender up to the keeping of others a person who is now dwelling beneath your roof?"

"Who does your Royal Highness mean?" demanded Coffin.

"I mean the young man who passes by the name of the Foundling——"

"Ah! what, Jack? I thought from what I've lately heard that he belongs by rights to some great family. I was quite sure that Larry Sampson," continued the Hangman, "did not go up to Taggarty's to make inquiries for nothing."

"Who or what the lad is you will never know," resumed the Prince, in a firm and decisive tone. "Be it sufficient for me to say that his mother is a lady who has enlisted my sympathies in her case; and I purpose to provide for the young man in a foreign country. Now, will you part with him by fair means?"

"To be sure—for the consideration named just now," answered the Hangman, readily.

"But in order to earn that other five hundred guineas," resumed the Prince, "you must do certain things to carry out the views which I entertain. In the first place, you must on some pretence or excuse cause the Foundling to be in the central recess on the left hand side of Westminster Bridge this night at eleven o'clock! In a word, he must keep the precise appointment which was originally made for *you*: and he must be left alone in that recess for at least a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes."

"What the deuce can this be for?" exclaimed the Hangman. "I should not like any harm to befall the boy——"

"Harm — nonsense!" ejaculated the Prince: "none is intended. But as circumstances compel me thus to confide in you, I have no objection to state for your security and tranquillity, that the object of the boy's being left alone in the recess of the bridge this night for a brief period, is to enable one who feels deeply interested in him to have an opportunity of gazing for once upon his countenance. Now do you understand me?"

"Perfectly—and it shall be done," replied the Hangman. "What next?"

"The moment you have left the Foundling in the recess," continued the Regent, "you will hasten to the end of the bridge on the Westminster side, and there you will encounter me. I shall be dressed as you see me now; and then I will explain to you what farther is required to be done."

"But I would rather know now," said the Hangman, naturally suspicious of treachery.

"Well," said the Prince, after a brief pause, "I think it may be better to explain myself at once. When the Foundling has been a quarter of an hour in the recess of the bridge, you will have to fetch him away again and induce him to accompany you in a boat on some pretence or another, as far as the receiving-ship which lies off the Tower Stairs. You will place him aboard that ship, and there leave him. These are all the details of the service which I require of you, and for which the other five hundred guineas shall be placed in your hands when I meet you on the bridge to-night. And now, before you utter a word in reply to my proposals, let me tell you that if you *do* undertake this night's service, you must beware of treachery! For were you to receive my gold and then keep the boy with you still, in the hope of making him the pretence and means of future exactions, I will find a way to wreak a deadly vengeance upon you. Therefore let us understand each other well——"

"Your Royal Highness needn't fear: I will be staunch to the back-bone," exclaimed the Hangman. "Of course I don't mind as long as I know the lad is to be properly dealt with."

"He shall be amply and honourably provided for in the Colonies," rejoined the Prince. "It was at first my intention to have him taken from

you without your knowledge, and to keep you in ignorance of what ultimately became of him: but on maturer reflection, I resolved—seeing that he had lived with you so long—to deal frankly and candidly with you. I have now done so; and I offer you a large—a very large reward."

"And I shan't prove ungrateful for the kindness you have shown," said the Hangman.

"As a matter of course," observed the Prince, a thought striking him, "you will not mention to the young man a single word beforehand?—you will not in any way excite his suspicion relative to the proceedings that are this night to take place with regard to him?"

"Trust me," exclaimed Coffin. "I shall know how to invent some excuse to make him stay in the recess of the bridge till I go back to fetch him again; and as for getting him in a boat down as far as the receiving-ship, that will be easy enough—for I have often taken him on queer expeditions the object of which he has never known till the time came. All that can be easily managed: the deuce of it is what am I to say afterwards to my young woman and her brother about his disappearance?"

"Say that he has run away," cried the Prince; "or been killed in some scuffle."

"Well, I suppose I shall find an excuse," observed the Hangman. "Has your Royal Highness anything more to say?"

"Nothing," was the response: "only to warn you once again to beware of perfidy, and to bid you meet me punctually at the beginning of Westminster Bridge as the clock strikes eleven—the Foundling being at that hour in the recess agreed upon."

"All shall be right as the mail," responded the Hangman.

He and the Prince then separated—the latter hastening across the Mall to St. James's Palace, and the former quitting the park at an equally speedy pace.

Astonished at all he had heard—devoured with curiosity to learn who the Foundling's parents really could be—revolving in his mind a thousand schemes to penetrate this mystery and turn it to subsequent advantage—Daniel Coffin sped towards Fleet Lane; and in the absorbing pre-occupation of his thoughts he accomplished a considerable portion of the distance ere he remembered that he had enjoined Lady Ernestina to be sure and meet him that night at eleven o'clock. But then he reflected that the Prince must have no doubt already told her, or would let her know during the evening, that he had changed his mind and required not her services to convey the five hundred guineas. Then, under these circumstances, would Ernestina repair to the bridge at all? The Hangman could not possibly conjecture: nor did he now choose to devote much attention to the subject. His desires in that quarter were, for the time being, all wrapped up in the more absorbing excitement of the business he had in hand and the money he had yet to earn.

Meantime the Prince Regent had entered St. James's Palace, and proceeded straight to the apartments of his sister the Princess Sophia. On obtaining an interview with her alone, he hastened to explain as much as he thought fit of what he had done in the matter now nearest her heart.

"Everything is arranged," he said, "in accordance with your desires. This night, at eleven o'clock, shall you have an opportunity of gazing for a few moments upon your son, and even of speaking to him a few words if you will. But in this case you will of course address him as a stranger; and I warn you against suffering any transitory feeling of weakness to betray you into a revelation to that youth ——"

"No, no—not for the world," interrupted the Princess, "would I confess to him the secret of his birth! I shall not trust myself to speak to him at all: I shall merely look upon him —— But enough of this! What other arrangements have you made?"

"At half-past ten to-night I shall come to fetch you," resumed the Prince: "and you will have to accompany me on foot to the place where I have arranged for the youth to be at eleven. As a matter of course I have been compelled to make a confidant of that dreadful man—I will not name him—with whom the boy has been living so long. After you have seen your son, that man will take him away in a boat to the receiving-ship lying off the Tower, the lieutenant in command of which has already received private instructions how to act. A vessel now lying at Gravesend and bound for Canada, sets sail at three o'clock in the morning, by which hour there will be ample time to place the youth on board——"

"And when he arrives in Canada?" asked the Princess, impatiently.

"A good situation will be provided for him," replied the Prince, "and ample opportunity afforded for his reformation and future welfare."

"Thank you, brother, for all this trouble—this forethought—this excellent arrangement," cried the Princess, the tears trickling down her cheeks: then as a sudden thought flashed to her mind, she exclaimed, "But that dreadful man of whom you have made a confidant ——"

"I shall take good care of him also," answered the Prince, with a look of sinister meaning.

He then took a temporary leave of his royal sister, promising to return again at half-past ten o'clock: and in the meantime he went back to Carlton House to indulge in a luxurious banquet and a copious flow of wine. But in the middle of the festivity he received a whispered intimation from his faithful valet Germain, that Lady Ernestina Dysart had called to see him upon most urgent business. Apologising therefore to his guests at the dinner-table for leaving them for a few minutes, the Prince repaired to the apartment to which Lady Ernestina had been shown.

"Pardon me for thus intruding upon you, at such an hour," said her ladyship, raising the dark veil which had covered her features: "but you remember when I saw you the other day that you were to communicate with me again—and I was fearful you might have forgotten that *this* is the night ——"

"No—I had not forgotten it," interrupted the Prince, taking the lady's hand and pressing it warmly. "But the truth is, my dear Ernestina, I have made some other arrangements. Indeed, on maturer reflection, I could not think of allowing you to perform so ignominious a part as to meet that ruffian for the purpose of giving him the money ——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Ernestina: "then I presume you have entrusted some other messenger with the requisite amount? You are sure you have not neglected it?"

"Not for the world!" cried the Prince, anxious to get back to the dinner-table. "Everything is arranged: and you have nothing to fear."

"A thousand thanks for this assurance!" exclaimed Ernestina. "And now farewell: I will not keep you another moment away from your guests."

The Prince pressed his lips to Ernestina's, and they separated—his Royal Highness returning to the banquet which he had quitted so reluctantly, and his frail friend issuing forth again from Carlton House. But as with her veil closely drawn down, she retraced her steps to Albemarle Street, Ernestina said to herself, "It is all right! My mortal enemy will be *there*—and opportunity will consequently still serve the resolve I have taken. 'Tis for *me* to anticipate the messenger whom the Prince will send with the money! Yes—the path is clear enough. One bold deed—one energetic act—one tremendous crime—and I am safe! But, Ah! better even that crime than live in constant terror of this dreadful man! And after all, it can be no crime to rid oneself of a mortal enemy: it is merely striking a blow in self-defence!"

Such were Ernestina's dreadful musings, as she hurriedly retraced her way to Leveson House.

At half-past ten o'clock the Prince Regent, once more muffled up in his ample cloak and wearing the hat with the slouched brims, issued forth from Carlton House, entered St. James's Palace, and repaired to the apartments of the Princess Sophia. Almost immediately afterwards, he came forth again, accompanied by his sister, who was likewise enveloped in a capacious mantle besides wearing a thick veil attached to her bonnet. Clinging to her brother's arm, she sped nervously on by his side, her heart beating audibly and painfully. Little was spoken between them as they traversed the park in the most cautious manner with a view to avoid observation; but on this score they were comparatively safe—for the night was tempestuous, the wind had risen, the rain was falling, and few people were abroad. Even the occasional stragglers whom they met, when emerging into Great George Street, and afterwards in Bridge Street, little suspected that the gentleman and lady whom they thus passed and who were muffled up in those ample cloaks, were the Prince Regent and his royal sister!

When within about a dozen yards of the beginning of the bridge, the Prince said in a hurried voice, "You must now cross to the other side of the street—and keep your eyes fixed upon me. The lamplight is strong enough for that purpose. Watch until you see a man join me: then, if I keep him in conversation, you may rest assured that it is the ruffian Coffin. In this case lose no time in hastening on to the recess which I have already explained to you, and where no doubt the youth will be seated. Fortunate is it for our enterprise that the night is so inclement: there are evidently but very few persons abroad, and the bridge seems comparatively deserted."

While making this last observation, the Prince's straining eyes followed the curvature of the bridge as it was traced by the double row of lamps; and few indeed were the passenger-forms that darkened the spaces of light produced by those lamps which were suspended over the massive stone recesses that have only within the last few years been removed from the bridge. In compliance with her brother's suggestions, the Princess Sophia quitted his arm—crossed the street—and from the opposite side attentively watched his movements. Eleven o'clock was proclaimed by the iron tongue of time sounding from Westminster Abbey; and while the metallic din of the last stroke was yet vibrating in the gusty night-wind, a man enveloped in coarse rough garments stepped up to the Prince.

"I'm Daniel Coffin," he said.

"All right!" responded his Royal Highness. "Is the lad there?"

"He is—and deucedly puzzled, too, to know what it can be all about."

"No matter, as long as he is there. You will have the kindness to remain here with me for a few minutes."

"To be sure," rejoined the Hangman. "Devilish good dodge on your part to prevent me going to see what sort of a lady it is that means to peep into the recess! But I don't mean to play your Royal Highness such a dirty trick——"

"Hush! address me not by name!" whispered the Prince, impatiently: then as he cast a look across the way, he beheld his sister hurrying on towards the recess! "Here—come a little farther into the shade, and take this bag. You found the contents of the other to be all right?"

"Nothing could be more accurate," answered Daniel Coffin, as he clutched this second bag which the Prince placed in his hand.

We must now digress for a few moments to state that just before the Prince Regent and his royal sister made their appearance in Bridge Street, Lady Ernestina Dysart had passed rapidly that way and had at once entered upon the bridge. She was not now clad in her widow's weeds, but wore a garb evidently assumed for the purpose of disguise; and while one hand kept down the folds of a dark thick veil over her features, the other firmly clutched a naked dagger beneath her cloak. Could any human glance have penetrated through that veil, it would have seen her countenance ghastly pale, and her ashy white lips compressed with the stern resolve that swayed her soul and was reflected in the fixed look of her eloquent eyes. Her pace was rapid but determined: there was not the least irresolution in her mien, her gait, nor in her heart.

Continuing her way over the bridge, she flung a quick searching look into the middle recess on the left hand side as she passed it by; but no one was there. She accordingly proceeded onward until she reached the extremity of the bridge on the Lambeth side: and there, just as she was about to turn back, she caught a sudden glimpse of the unmistakable features of the Hangman as he looked up for a moment and the light of the lamp fell upon his countenance. Ernestina did not give a second glance: that one was sufficient—and as she thus acquired the sudden certainty that her mortal enemy was upon the bridge, a flame appeared to diffuse itself throughout her entire being. Instead of turning back at the instant, she walked a few yards farther on—saying to herself, "I will allow him time to reach the recess ere I retrace my way."

By not flinging a second glance upon the Hangman, but remaining satisfied with the one which had showed her he was there, she did not notice that some one accompanied him. With the fires of anticipated vengeance coursing through her veins, and clutching her dagger still more firmly than even at first, she turned back—retraced her steps—and just as she reached the middle recess, again caught sight of the Hangman who was standing on the footway as if waiting for some one. But a passenger was advancing behind Ernestina at the moment—and therefore she herself passed rapidly on. In a minute however she stopped and allowed the individual to pass her by. Another person was now also coming from behind; and without looking towards him, she also allowed him to pass. Then suddenly turning back, just as the Abbey clock began to strike eleven, she hastened to the recess.

At that moment a strong gust of wind swept over the bridge, making the flames flicker in the lamps in such a way that it seemed as if about to extinguish them. But by the uncertain glimmering Ernestina beheld the form of a man seated in the recess: and gliding in rapid as a ghost, she raised the dagger and drove it deep down into that individual's breast.

The attack was so sudden and as a matter of course so unexpected, that Jack the Foundling—for he indeed the victim was—no sooner caught a glimpse of the weapon flashing before his eyes in the lamp-light, than he was overpowered by the blow. A faint cry came from his lips as he fell back in the recess: but a louder and still more agonizing ejaculation burst from the tongue of the wretched Ernestina as the glimpse which she caught of the countenance suddenly upturned in mortal agony, showed her that it was *not* the Hangman whom she had thus stricken, but a youth whom she had never seen before!

Those cries—that of the young man and that of the assassin-lady—were drowned in the gust which was sweeping over the bridge: but suddenly seized with a frenzied horror, Ernestina fled precipitately, leaving the dagger sticking in the breast of the unfortunate youth. Alas! had she used a little more caution, this frightful misadventure would not have occurred: for she would perhaps have seen that the second individual whom she stopped to let pass, just before she flew back to the recess to deal the blow, was the very man for whom that blow was really intended!

We must now return to the Princess Sophia, whom we left watching at the commencement of the bridge. She saw through the gloom of night the dark form of a man accost her brother on the opposite side of the way: she lingered for a few moments to mark whether they remained together; and observing that they did so, she of course felt convinced that it was the Public Executioner! She therefore hastened along the bridge; and as she drew near the recess where she was to behold her son, such indescribable feelings seized upon her that she felt as if she had not courage to proceed, but must turn back abruptly! The next moment, however, she blamed herself for yielding to such sensations: and then, by a sudden revulsion of the heart's inscrutable emotions, she was seized with a fervid longing to gratify her curiosity and behold the offspring of her illicit love.

Inspired, therefore, with all the warmth of these maternal feelings—impelled by the parental yearnings that thus suddenly asserted their empire over her heart—the Princess Sophia sped onward and gained the recess. At that moment the wind was lulled—the lamp was burning steadily overhead—and its light was thrown full into the recess.

Heavens! what an appalling spectacle met the eyes of the Princess!—for *there*, within that nook of masonry—instead of her living son, whose animated countenance she expected to behold—a youth lay stretched upon the stone seat, his face ghastly and his eyes fixed like those of a corpse, and a dagger sticking deep in his breast!

A wild cry swept along the bridge—a cry which no gushing wind at that moment absorbed or drowned,—but a cry whose rending anguish thrilled to each extremity, rebounding from bank to bank, and reaching the ears of the Prince Regent and the Public Executioner.

END OF VOL. 1 OF THE SECOND SERIES.

THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE DAYS OF HOGARTH," "FAUST," "WAGNER, THE WERR-WOLF," "THE PIXY," "ROBERT MACAIRE," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "THE SEAMSTRESS," "THE BRONZE STATUE," "POPE JOAN," "KENNETH," &c., &c., &c.

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THE MYSTERIES

OF

THE COURT OF LONDON.

THE PRINCESS CHARLOTTE.

CHAPTER CX.

THE YOUNG PRINCESS.

On the same evening and at about the same hour that the preceding scene took place on Westminster bridge, the Princess Charlotte was passing through an ordeal of considerable mental excitement at Windsor Castle.

Retiring soon after ten o'clock to her own chamber, she dismissed her attendant-ladies and sate down to pen a long letter to her mother. For it will be remembered that the Princess Sophia had, on the previous day, undertaken to write to

Jocelyn Loftus and beseech him to pay an immediate visit to London, that she might hold a consultation with him relative to the conspiracy then on foot against the Princess of Wales. Now the young Princess Charlotte hoped, with the sanguine fervour that was natural to her age, not only that her aunt's letter would find Jocelyn at Canterbury, but that he would pay immediate attention to it by hurrying up to London, and that he would thence set off to Italy to warn the persecuted Princess Caroline of her danger. In this case Jocelyn might become the bearer of a letter from the young Princess Charlotte to her injured mother—not a mere letter which she would be compelled to write guardedly and in such a manner as to exempt it from the chance of suppression, but a letter wherein she might give free vent to all the filial fondness that she experienced towards the being who gave her birth.

The composition of this letter occupied the Princess upwards of an hour; and as she laid down her pen the time-piece on the mantel chimed eleven. The night was tempestuous: gusts of wind swept round the old towers of the palatial castle; and the rain was from time to time driven forcibly against the window-panes. The young Princess glanced around the spacious bed-chamber in which she was seated; and as the thought slowly crept into her mind that many and many a horror—many a cruel deed—and many an atrocity had been perpetrated within the walls of Windsor Castle, she wondered whether that particular room had ever been the scene of bloodshed. As this idea stole into her brain, she shuddered with a deep involuntary tremor: and again did her glance sweep rapidly around the apartment. But although it was furnished in the most sumptuous manner,—with gorgeous draperies drawn over the windows—golden-fringed hangings surrounding the gilt couch—the walls papered with a cheerful pattern and adorned with several splendid paintings—the cornices all elaborately carved and edged with gilding—the mantel-piece covered with ornaments—the magnificent mirrors reflecting the light of several wax-tapers, and thus enhancing the lustre that flooded the room with its yellow glow—the toilette-table, the cheffoniers, and the chest of drawers all covered with elegant trifles and brilliant nick-nacks,—in a word, although nothing could exceed the gay and gorgeous aspect of that apartment, yet did it this night seem in the eyes of the Princess to be even more sombre and gloomy than any old tapestried chamber, filled with mouldering furniture and moth-eaten hangings, in the haunted castle of romance.

The truth is, the mind of the young Princess was in that morbid state which made her view everything in a melancholy light—or rather, through the ominous cloud that thus hung upon her soul. She was unhappy: for many, many reasons was she unhappy—not only on account of her mother, but because she felt that she belonged to a family almost every member of which was steeped to the lips in vices, immoralities, and treacheries, if not stained with downright crime. It seemed to her, then, as if she were sprung from a doomed race—a race whose infamies had rendered it accursed in the sight of heaven, and whose punishment had to some extent—in the person of the lunatic King—commenced upon earth. No wonder that her mind became attenuated as thus she pondered, or that it should have thus been imbued with superstitious tendencies, so that when she looked around that sumptuously-furnished room, she beheld not the superb draperies and the brilliant ornaments, but fancied that there was blood upon the walls, and that the stains of murder met her looks on every side!

Naturally of a strong and decisive character, the young Princess endeavoured to cast off this superstitious feeling which was gaining upon her. But she could not. Recent experience, together with the dark mysterious hints that in various ways and at different times met her ears, had made her aware that the royal personages of the present age were fully capable of abhorrent perfidies, base conspiracies, and most probably of flagrant crimes: and if such were the case at the beginning of the nineteenth century and in an age of civilization, of what horrors and of what atrocities might former royal families have been guilty, in earlier periods and in darker times? Oh! had not the walls of Windsor Castle been witnesses of scenes whereof no memory remained and no record was kept, save in the eternal registers of heaven's chancery?—and was it not probable that every room, every chamber, every nook, and every corner of that castellated abode of England's Kings had been the theatre of some remorseless deed or foul midnight murder?

These were the ideas that came trooping through the brain of the Princess, producing upon her the same effect as if a procession of shrouded spectres passed before her view; and unable to endure the awful nature of her thoughts, she rose from her seat and advanced towards the fire-place. But as her eyes fell upon the mirror above the mantel, it struck her that some horrible countenance was looking over her shoulder. A shriek rose to her very lips as she turned abruptly round with a strong recoil; but the scream died instantaneously away ere it found vent—for there was naught near her—nothing palpable to alarm her; and she saw that she was the prey of a fevered fancy. Terror however parched her tongue and made her throat feel as dry as if she had swallowed ashes; and advancing towards a table, she filled a glass with water and conveyed it to her lips. But at that moment a gust of wind swept with such violence against the window that the casement rattled as if some intruder were trying to force an entry; and the splendid draperies waved backward and forward with the draught as if some one were concealed behind and purposely shaking them.

The fears of the Princess now arose to an intolerable height; and unable any longer to endure the solitude of her chamber, she was about to ring the bell to summon her ladies-in-waiting. But she suddenly recollected that as she had dismissed them for the night, they had separated to their own apartments, and that if they were recalled she would have to explain the reason for thus summoning them back to her presence; and her natural pride revolted from the idea of confessing that she was afraid to be left alone during so tempestuous a night. She accordingly endeavoured to conquer her fears. But she could not. There seemed to be a spell upon her mind—a mysterious gloom which she could not shake off. It was like an ominous foreboding—vague and unknown—but not the less oppressive and painful. Suddenly she

bethought herself that the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane's chamber was close at hand, and that this lady having been somewhat indisposed, had kept her room all day. It therefore occurred to the young Princess that she might repair to Mrs. Bredalbane's apartment for the ostensible reason of inquiring after her, but in reality for the sake of companionship,—her Royal Highness hoping that half-an-hour's friendly discourse with this lady, whom she liked much, would perhaps cheer her mind, or at all events efface these superstitious terrors which at present forebade her from seeking her couch.

We may here observe that the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane was one of the Bed-chamber Women attached to the Queen's household. She was a widow—about forty years of age—very affable and kind-hearted—but given to scandal and amazingly fond of gossiping. Her lodging at the Castle was at the end of the same passage from which the Princess Charlotte's own suite of apartments opened, and which indeed communicated with the rooms of several of the Court ladies.

Issuing forth from her chamber, the young Princess threaded the passage, which was lighted with lamps suspended to the ceiling; and she reached the extremity of the carpetted corridor without encountering a soul. The door which she now gently opened led into a little ante-chamber beyond which was Mrs. Bredalbane's own room; and as the Princess approached the door of the latter, she heard voices speaking within. Suddenly reminded that she would perhaps be intruding, she was about to retire at once, when a word—a name—which suddenly smote her ear, transfixed her to the spot and all in a moment inspired her with the keenest curiosity and the acutest interest.

That name was *Sellis!*

There were candles burning upon the table in the ante-chamber. A velvet curtain hung in the doorway between the two rooms; and the door itself was now ajar. The reader may therefore understand how it was that the presence of the Princess was not observed by those who were in the bed-chamber, and how she was thus enabled to become an unseen listener to the conversation that was going on and in which her interest had been excited in so sudden and so lively a manner. The voice which she had heard mention the name of Sellis was that of the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane; and she speedily discovered that the friend with whom Mrs. Bredalbane was thus familiarly conversing, was Lady Prescott—also one of the royal Bedchamber Women. On a former occasion, the Princess Charlotte had heard these two ladies in confidential discourse together; and her ears had then caught enough to make her long to know more. Now therefore that the opportunity so unexpectedly but so favourably presented itself, she could not resist the temptation. Forgetting all her recent terrors, and too much swayed by intense curiosity to reflect for a moment that she was acting wrong thus to play the eaves-dropper, the young Princess was so completely transfixed at the mention of the name of *Sellis*, that she could not possibly avoid remaining where she had thus suddenly stopped short: and losing sight of every other subject that a moment before had been uppermost in her mind, she gave all her attention to the discourse that was taking place in the inner chamber.

"You seem, my dear Mrs. Bredalbane," said Lady Prescott, "to be somewhat bitter against the Duke of Cumberland. Surely you have imbibed no unjust prejudice towards that Prince?"

"Prejudice, my dear friend!" exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "I am really surprised that you should deem me capable of such a failing. It is perfectly true that I do not like the Duke, and that he never was any favourite of mine: but although I may have my aversions and my antipathies, I should scorn to invent any evil reports, or exaggerate those already in circulation, to serve a vindictive purpose."

"Oh! I know you too well," cried Lady Prescott, "to need such assurances from your lips; and if I spoke of prejudice, I was assuredly wrong. I am aware, my dear friend, that you are better acquainted than any other lady of the Court with the secrets and mysteries of the Royal Family——"

"Yes," observed Mrs. Bredalbane, in a sort of musing tone: "I could tell some strange tales if I chose. But there are certain things with which I am acquainted, and which will never pass my lips."

"When I asked you just now," said Lady Prescott, "to give me all the details relative to the affair of Sellis and the Duke of Cumberland, I did not wish to intrude upon any secret or special knowledge that you may possess concerning that lamentable tragedy. I merely thought that as I was not in London at the time, but buried in that Welsh solitude to which Sir John Prescott took me for my health—as you must remember——"

"Yes—I recollect that you were absent at the time: and when I sent you the newspapers containing the proceedings, I remember," continued Mrs. Bredalbane, "that your husband wrote to beg I would desist from forwarding the journals, as you were in such a nervous state through ill-health that any excitement was most prejudicial."

"And therefore, you perceive, my dear friend," said Lady Prescott, "that I am ignorant of most of the details connected with that dreadful affair. When I returned to Court after my Welsh rustication, the death of the Princess Amelia had become the all-absorbing topic of mournful interest; and no one ever breathed a word relative to the Sellis tragedy. It had therefore well nigh fled from my memory until you so singularly and pointedly alluded to it the other day. I then asked you to give me the full narrative; and you were about to comply with my request, when something interrupted the discourse——"

"I recollect," said Mrs. Bredalbane: "it was during the card-party the other night, and I thought that as we were seated in the window-recess, the Princess Charlotte was listening to what we said. That is the reason I broke off the topic so suddenly."

"And now therefore," continued Lady Prescott, "that we are all alone together, and free from interruption—indeed without a chance of anybody intruding upon us—I hope you will gratify my curiosity."

"I have no objection," replied Mrs Bredalbane: then, after a pause, she commenced her narrative in a low and measured tone, as if she were not only impressed with the solemn seriousness of the subject, but also afraid that the very walls themselves had ears.

CHAPTER CXI.

THE SELLIS TRAGEDY.

"You are aware that the Duke of Cumberland, at the time of which I am about to speak, occupied the same suite of apartments where he now resides, in the Kitchen Court of St. James's Palace. You will also recollect that it was upwards of four years ago, in the summer of 1810, when the fearful tragedy occurred. At that time the three principal valets of his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland were Sellis, Neale, and Joux; and they took turns, week by week, in doing duty. Joseph Sellis was an Italian—short in stature but well-made, with an olive complexion, and tolerably good-looking. He was married, and had four children. His habits were exceedingly domesticated and regular: he was a good, steady man—a kind husband and an excellent father. Indeed he was perfectly uxorious in his attentions towards his wife, who was a somewhat handsome woman; and so fond was he of his children that if either of them experienced the slightest ailment, he became overwhelmed with grief and a prey to the most excruciating apprehensions. His wife was an exemplary woman: and altogether it would be impossible to conceive a happier family than that of Sellis. In disposition he was mild, inoffensive, and obliging: thoroughly humane, he seemed incapable of harming a soul—but, on the contrary, was ever ready to perform a generous deed or render a service. In fact, he was liked not only by the Duke of Cumberland, but by the Royal Family in general, all the Princes and Princesses noticing him and expressing a constant interest in his welfare. They, moreover, made him numerous presents, and never seemed wearied of heaping favours upon him. To such an extent was he thus esteemed, or indeed caressed, by Royalty, that the Duke and one of his sisters—the Princess Augusta it was—stood sponsors for Sellis's youngest child. Moreover, though all the servants of the Duke's household were on board wages, and the valets were not regularly lodged in St James's—the one on duty for the week alone being expected to sleep there as a general rule—Sellis and his family were nevertheless accommodated with rooms over the gateway leading into the Kitchen Court from Cleveland Row. These rooms communicated by means of a passage with the Duke's suite of apartments; and sometimes the Princesses, when on a visit to their brother's rooms, would pass into Sellis's lodgings and fondle his children. In addition to his wages, which were handsome, he had various perquisites such as were enjoyed by no other dependant in the Duke's household;—and thus in every way was Sellis a favourite, and all circumstances combined to render him a happy man."

"And was he perfectly sane," inquired Lady Prescott;—"in the full and complete enjoyment of his reason?"

"Undoubtedly," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "Quiet but cheerful—unobtrusive in manner, though of a gay disposition—and so temperate that he never tasted spirits, disliked wine, and habitually drank water—Sellis was never a prey to any unnatural excitement. In fact, he was just one of those persons who seem fitted by nature to pass tranquilly and serenely through life, experiencing as little of its agitation and turmoil as can possibly fall to the lot of mortals. Thrifty and economical, abstemious and regular in his mode of life, he was not only free from pecuniary embarrassment, but had accumulated some little savings from his wages, which the presents he had received from the Royal Family had materially increased."

"Then he was altogether a good and excellent man?" said Lady Prescott.

"An excellent man!" cried Mrs. Bredalbane with marked emphasis. "But having now concluded my prefatory remarks, I shall enter upon the recital of that most dread tragedy which has made the name of Sellis known throughout the world. It was, then, in the forenoon of the 31st of May, 1810, that Sellis was walking with his wife in St. James's Park. His mood was gay and cheerful as usual; and the discourse chiefly turned upon the preparations which he wished his wife to make for a little party that he proposed to give in the course of the ensuing week to celebrate the birth-day of one of his children. Mrs. Sellis promised compliance with all her husband's suggestions; and at two o'clock they re-entered their lodgings. Dinner was served up; and Sellis ate with his usual appetite. But scarcely was the meal over when one of the children was taken ill with indigestion. The surgeon was sent for; and although there was no positive danger, yet such was the anxiety of Sellis that he requested his wife to let the child remain with her that night, observing that he would sleep in his own room in the Duke's suite of apartments. Mrs. Sellis consented; and in the evening—between six and seven o'clock—Sellis repaired to the room alluded to, to see that it was in proper order for him to pass the night there; because, I should observe, it was not Sellis's week for being on duty about the person of his royal master—it was Neale's turn—and thus Sellis was not supposed to be occupying his room in the ducal apartments, but to be sleeping (as was his wont when off duty) in his own lodgings. I may further add that the chamber of which I am speaking, and which must be called *Sellis's room*, was at the end of a passage communicating with the Duke's private apartment, and that adjoining this apartment—indeed, separated from it by only a thin partition of wainscot—was *Neale's room*. Be kind enough to keep these particulars in your memory——"

"I shall not lose sight of them," observed Lady Prescott. "Pray proceed, my dear friend—I am dying with curiosity——"

"I am now approaching the blood-stained chapter of this narrative," said Mrs Bredalbane. "It appears that Sellis having assured himself that his room was in order, and that the housemaid had not omitted to set it to rights since he last slept there, was about to return to his wife, when he bethought himself of something that he wished to say to Neale. He accordingly repaired to Neale's room; and with the familiarity usually subsisting between the fellow-members of the same household, he opened the door without knocking. But suddenly starting back in dismay, he exclaimed, '*Heavens! the Princess Augusta!*' and fled along the passage. But in his precipitate flight, he ran against Joux—the Duke's third valet—who was advancing up the passage at the moment, and who had heard that ejaculation which burst from his lips. On observing Joux, Sellis instantaneously endeavoured to

assume an air of composure; and he began to apologise for his awkwardness in running against him. But Joux saw plainly enough that something had transpired not only to disconcert his fellow-page, but to agitate him profoundly. Nevertheless, as Sellis did not volunteer any explanation—but, on the contrary, sought to veil his excited feelings as much as possible – Joux did not think it right to question him upon the subject. In the midst of the apologies that Sellis was making for his awkwardness, he suddenly broke off to inquire whither Joux was going.—'*To speak to Neale*,' was the response. '*No: you cannot see him; he is engaged*,' exclaimed Sellis, with a strange wildness of look and a most unaccountable abruptness of tone. '*Come along with me*:' and clutching Joux by the arm, he led him into his lodgings. There he became more composed—or else put on a forced composure; and taking wine and brandy from the cupboard, he invited Joux to help himself. The invalid child was asleep at the time; and Mrs. Sellis joined her husband and Joux in the parlour. Sellis mixed her a little brandy-and-water: Joux took some liquor also; but Sellis himself abstained entirely, as was his habit. Joux remained there for about an hour, during which interval Sellis seemed to recover his wonted cheerfulness and self-possession—or if not, he at all events concealed his emotions so successfully that his wife failed to observe anything peculiar about him, beyond the anxiety which he expressed on account of his child. Presently the surgeon returned, and pronounced the little invalid to be better, assuring Sellis that there was not the slightest danger. Joux then took his departure, wondering what could possibly have been the cause of that extraordinary excitement which he had witnessed, and of that singular ejaculation which had burst from the lips of Sellis, when rushing so precipitately along the passage. It was now past eight o'clock in the evening; and Sellis remained with his wife until ten. During this interval he was engaged in reading; and Mrs. Sellis did not observe anything peculiar in his manner. Embracing her and the children with his wonted affection, and observing that he should be up early to ascertain how the invalid little one had passed the night, he withdrew to his own room."

"And this was at ten on the memorable night?" said Lady Prescott, inquiringly.

"Yes," responded Mrs. Bredalbane. "The Duke of Cumberland, who had gone to a concert, returned soon after midnight and retired to his own apartment, where Neale was in attendance. Then all was quiet in the palace for a couple of hours. But at about half-past two o'clock in the morning the hall-porter was alarmed by a cry of '*Murder*;' and starting up, he beheld the Duke of Cumberland in his night-shirt, which was covered with blood. Neale was with him—and Mrs. Neale, who slept by herself in another part of the premises, was instantaneously fetched. The alarm spread through the palace—and while one footman ran to summon the Duke's medical attendants, another went to call in the guard. The Duke, leaning upon Neale's arm, returned to his apartment, whither Joux, who had been roused by the alarm, speedily repaired. An inquiry was then made for Sellis. '*Go and tell him that his Royal Highness has been well nigh murdered*,' said Neale.—Joux accordingly sped along the passage towards Sellis's room, and on his way he was joined by Mrs. Neale and the porter. On opening the door, an appalling spectacle presented itself to their view. Sellis was lying dead upon the couch, his throat cut in so horrible a manner that his head was nearly severed from his body. A razor, covered with blood, was lying upon the floor. The body was completely dressed, save and except the cravat, coat, and shoes: it seemed as if the unfortunate man had thrown himself on the bed as one does when over-exhausted or else when not feeling any inclination to retire to rest altogether, and that sleep had stolen upon him—that sleep whence he was never to awake! The wash-basin was half full of water stained with blood; and on the edge of the basin were the marks of bloody fingers plainly visible. The cravat was upon the toilette-table — the coat folded up and placed on a chair: the deceased's watch was in the pocket at the bed's head. That Sellis had been murdered, was the conviction which instantaneously struck Joux: the first glance which he threw upon the appalling scene, showed him that this was no case of suicide, but a foul assassination!"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, in a tone of horror. "Poor creature! — unfortunate man!"

"I must now observe," resumed Mrs. Bredalbane, "that the hall-porter and Mrs. Neale did not advance into the room at all, but the former remained for a few moments transfixed with horror upon the threshold, while the latter fled to raise the alarm that Sellis had committed suicide! Such was no doubt the impression made at the instant upon the woman's mind. The hall-porter, on regaining his self-possession, hurried away likewise to spread the same rumour; and Joux was left alone in the room where the frightful tragedy had taken place. Advancing nearer towards the couch, he observed a sheet of paper lying upon the floor. He picked it up: it was a half-finished letter in the handwriting of Sellis—and as Joux hastily ran his eyes over the first few lines, a tremendous secret was suddenly revealed to him. He understood it all! The excitement of Sellis and the ejaculation which had burst from his lips in the passage—yes, even this murder itself—all was explained! But footsteps were approaching; and Joux thrust the letter into his pocket. The next moment a serjeant and file of men, who had been fetched from the guard-house, made their appearance at the room door. The serjeant's name was Creighton; and entering the chamber of death, he gazed in horror upon the scene. As he turned away, he observed the razor upon the floor, and picking it up, placed it upon the table. He then went out, followed by Joux; and the room was locked up. The guard retired—and Joux, hastening to the Duke's room, found that Sir Henry Halford and Mr. Home, the eminent medical practitioners, had arrived and were dressing his Royal Highness's wounds, which they pronounced to be severe, but not mortal. Joux heard the account which the Duke gave of the affair, and then hastened to shut himself up in his own room, to read the letter of which he had as yet only caught a glimpse of the few first lines. What his feelings were *while* perusing that letter—what his reflections were *after* he had read it—I shall not pause to explain now: you shall have an op-

portunity of judging presently, when I show you the letter itself!"

"The letter itself!" cried Lady Prescott, with a perfect thrill of astonishment in her accents.

"Yes—the letter itself," repeated Mrs. Bredalbane, in a positive tone. "You are not perhaps aware that Joux entered my service soon after the tragedy, and remained with me for upwards of a year. He told me everything—he gave me the letter——But I am anticipating——"

"Yes—pray proceed in due course, my dear friend," said Lady Prescott; "although I am on the tenter-hooks of curiosity."

"You may conceive," resumed the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane, "the amazement, the horror, and the consternation which seized upon the startled metropolis, when the morning papers of June 1st, announced that '*the Duke of Cumberland had been surprised while asleep by an attempted assassination, made by one of his valets named Sellis, and who had put a period to his own existence.*' A thousand rumours were instantaneously in circulation; and in many quarters the story of the suicide was utterly disbelieved—the valet was declared to have been murdered, and the darkest hints were thrown out. A jury was summoned in the afternoon of the 1st of June, to investigate the matter. But you may conceive the astonishment of the jury, when the coroner began by informing them '*that a long examination of the principal witnesses had already been gone into, and that of course it would only now be necessary to have the depositions then taken read before them (the jury) to the witnesses!*'* All the depositions which had been previously and privately taken, were therefore now read. The first was that of the Duke of Cumberland. His Royal Highness deposed that he was awakened from a profound sleep by the sensation of some blows being dealt upon his forehead; and at first he thought there was a bat in the room flying over his head. But by the light of the wax-taper he beheld the form of a man; and springing from his couch, he grappled with him, wrenching away the sword which had been the weapon of attack. He then saw the assassin escape, but without perceiving who he was; and raising his voice he summoned Neale, who slept in the adjoining room. Neale instantaneously hurried to his royal master; and then they went to the hall together to give the alarm in the manner I have already described. On returning to the Duke's chamber, they instituted a search in a closet opening therefrom; and in that closet they found a pair of Sellis's slippers. From this circumstance it was inferred that Sellis was the assassin—that he had concealed himself in the closet previously to the Duke retiring for the night—and that failing in his attempt at murder, he had fled to his own room and committed suicide. Neale's deposition confirmed that of the Duke in every detail; and Neale gratuitously added his opinion that Sellis was a morose, bad-tempered, discontented person. I will here observe that every other person belonging to the ducal household who was examined, deposed to the very reverse in respect to Sellis's character and disposition, and described him as civil, inoffensive, kind-hearted, and good-tempered. The weapon with which the Duke had been attacked, was his own regimental sword, which had been left lying about in his room for some days. The walls between his Royal Highness's chamber and the hall were covered with blood-stains, caused by the Duke's hands when he went to alarm the porter. The medical evidence proved that his Royal Highness's wounds were most severe — that one of his fingers was nearly severed—and that his head was so much hurt that the arteries of the brain were laid bare. Having listened to the reading of the principal depositions, the jury went to view the corpse of Sellis. The room had been left just as it was when the tragedy was first discovered. The newspapers described the body as '*lying on a bed of matted blood, livid and loathsome, with a horrid gash from ear to ear; and over all the features the distortion of pain was visible, apparently struggling with the ghastly composure of death.*'* The back of the head lay against the deceased's watch; and the basin, with the blood-dyed water and the finger-marks, was still there. On returning to the room where the inquest was held, the jury heard the evidence of the surgeons who had examined the corpse. They deposed that the windpipe was cut completely through, and that the wound was six inches in length and an inch and a half in diameter. The unhappy widow of the deceased deposed to the effect that her husband was steady, abstemious, and affectionate to herself and children—that he was in no pecuniary embarrassment—and that he had never shown the slightest symptom of mental aberration. The jury returned a verdict of *Felo de se;* the corpse was put into a hearse at dead of night, and hurried to Scotland Yard, when it was buried in a hole with a stake driven through it. Thus terminated this melancholy affair, so far as the public is acquainted with the particulars; and of course Sellis has been branded as a cowardly assassin—a midnight murderer—a miserable suicide——"

"But Joux — the French valet?" exclaimed Lady Prescott: "wherefore was he not examined at the inquest?—and why was not the letter produced?"

"Ah! those are the particulars on which I am now going to enter," observed the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane. "The epistle — the half-finished epistle, penned by poor Sellis—is in that writing-desk; and I will show it to you. First, however, let me explain——"

But at this moment an ejaculation of mingled amazement and terror struck upon the startled ears of Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott.

CHAPTER CXII.

THE QUEEN.

THE reader will be kind enough to remember that while Mrs. Bredalbane was reciting her narrative of awful interest to Lady Prescott, the Princess Charlotte was enchained, a spell-bound listener, in the ante-chamber. But at the moment when Mrs Bredalbane seemed about to enter upon the most thrilling portion of her history, the outer door of that ante-chamber opened suddenly; and

* These words are quoted from the *Times*' report of the Inquest, June 2nd, 1810.

* *Times*, June 2nd, 1810.

the Princess Charlotte, turning abruptly round, gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled amazement and alarm on beholding the prim starch figure of the Queen.

This was the ejaculation that reached the ears of the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott; and springing from their seats by the cheerful fire that was blazing in the inner room, they rushed to the doorway—flung aside the curtain—and, to their indescribable wonderment, beheld the Princess Charlotte on one side of the ante-chamber and her Majesty the Queen on the other. Instantaneously struck with the conviction that their conversation had been overheard by one or the other of the royal ladies, if not by both, Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott exchanged looks of uneasiness and vexation.

"What are you doing here, at this time of night?" demanded the Queen, bending a harsh and severe look upon the young Princess.

"I—I—came—that is," stammered the youthful Charlotte, utterly at a loss what response to give or what excuse to make; "I came to—to——"

"Methinks, to say the least of it," said the Queen, bridling up, "it is particularly indiscreet for a young Princess—the daughter of England's Regent—the grand-daughter of England's crowned Sovereigns—to be thus absent from her own apartment at midnight."

"Madam," exclaimed the young Princess, the haughty blood flushing her cheeks and turning the marble of her brow into glowing crimson; "be pleased to recollect the motto upon the royal arms and apply it to yourself: *Evil be to him (or her) who evil thinks.*"

"Grand-daughter, this is an impertinence on your part," said the Queen, darting the savage glance of a tiger-cat upon the Princess: then in a colder tone she observed, but still with sneering accents, "I must however admit the justice of hearing your defence before I condemn. Therefore, perhaps you will have the kindness to explain wherefore you are here, listening so attentively as you were, like any eavesdropper, at the moment I entered the chamber."

"Ah! madam, you are determined to humiliate me!" exclaimed the Princess, bursting into tears: for this was the first time she had ever been so harshly and cruelly treated by the Queen.

As for Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott—they instantaneously comprehended from her Majesty's words that the young Princess had been listening to their discourse; and well knowing that if she were to repeat to the Queen all that had been said, they would receive a prompt command to quit the Castle, bag and baggage, they threw earnestly imploring looks upon her Royal Highness. The Princess, at once catching the meaning of those glances and penetrating the ladies' fears, suddenly wiped her eyes and flung a look of reassurance upon them. Then, putting on an air of dignified composure, she said, "I must confess I did listen at this doorway for a few moments; but it was only to ascertain who was within—inasmuch as the phantasy had seized me to come and pass half-an-hour with Mrs. Bredalbane, intelligence having reached me that she was somewhat indisposed."

"Permit me, then, to observe," said the Queen, with a prim starch aspect and a considerable acerbity of tone, "that it is altogether contrary to Court etiquette, as well as being a breach of maiden propriety, to wander from one room to another between eleven and twelve o'clock at night. But come, grand-daughter: I wish to speak to you."

"Good night, ladies," said the Princess, casting upon the two Bed-chamber Women a look to assure them that the secret of their conversation on so ticklish a topic was safe with her: and she then followed the Queen away from the apartment.

"I have been seeking you in your own chamber, Charlotte," said her Majesty, "because I wished to have some conversation with you. Indeed, I was informed that you had dismissed your ladies for the night at an earlier hour than usual, but that you had not retired to rest: and this intelligence, added to your altered looks during the day, determined me to demand an explanation at your hands."

Thus spoke the Queen, as she led the way along the passage towards her royal grand-daughter's room. But just as they reached the threshold and the Princess caught a glimpse of the writing-materials on the table, the recollection instantaneously flashed to her that she had left the letter to her mother lying upon the table! The Queen, then, had perhaps read it? Yes—there was little doubt that such was the case; and hence that bitterness of tone and manner which her Majesty had shown towards her for the first time!

"Not finding you ere now," said the Queen, as she advanced into the room, while the Princess followed, closing the door behind her,—"I took the liberty of ascertaining what had been the nature of your most recent studies; and if I were therein guilty of an undue amount of curiosity, at all events it was not more reprehensible than that which you have just now shown in listening to the conversation of my Bed-chamber Women."

The vein of sarcasm which began to penetrate through this speech from its commencement, increased in bitterness as her Majesty went on speaking; and as she gave utterance to the concluding words, her eyes settled upon the letter that lay on the table.

"I understand your Majesty," said the young Princess, her indignation suddenly aroused to a degree that armed her with a more than feminine courage: "you have been reading the letter which I inadvertently left here?"

"Yes—I have read every word of it," responded the Queen, in a cold tone of defiance. "I have read how you dare accuse your own father, your uncles, myself, and several of the proudest nobles and most virtuous ladies in the country, of being engaged in a conspiracy——"

"It is true, madam, it is true!" exclaimed the young Princess, looking grandly handsome at that moment in the flush and the glow of her great indignation. "Even while compelled to admit that this eaves-dropping of to-night is not the first instance of the kind of which I have been guilty, I at once and unhesitatingly proclaim to your face that from your own lips have I heard the avowal of a conspiracy's existence!"

"You dare?" ejaculated the Queen, turning very pale, and with a strange quivering of the lips—for she knew not what to think.

"Yes, I dare, madam!" exclaimed the Princess, "I dare accuse you thus boldly: and I dare also aver that I listened and overheard every syllable

that took place between your Majesty and Mrs. Owen yesterday. Hence that alteration in my looks which you have observed ——"

"Ah! then denial will be useless," muttered the Queen between her false teeth; and drawing forth a snuff-box from her bag, she took a huge pinch of the stimulating powder; then, as if it had inspired her with the insolent spirit of one who boldly throws off the mask when it becomes impossible to wear it any longer, she said, "You and I had better understand each other at once, Charlotte. In that letter,"—and she pointed to the one upon the table,—"you inform your mother that you have accidentally discovered the atrocious conspiracy which exists to ruin her, but that through the kindness of your aunt Sophia you expect to secure the services of a young gentleman whom you do not know otherwise than by name, in order to help your mother to frustrate the designs of her enemies: and this letter you propose to transmit by your new friend Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, provided you can in reality secure him as the champion of this cause! Now if, after reading that letter, I searched for you in all the adjacent rooms until I found you in Mrs. Bredalbane's antechamber, it was for the express purpose of letting you know at once that there is but *one* will in England at this moment which shall be paramount —and that is *my* will! You are not Queen yet: and unless you yield implicitly to my advice, you never shall be. Your own father would help to disinherit you in favour of one of his brothers, if you were to thwart his purposes. As for Sophia—the foolish minx!—how dares she interfere in these matters? As if she herself were so very immaculate!"—and the words came hissing from the Queen's mouth.

"What! would you asperse the character of your own daughter?" exclaimed the young Princess Charlotte, darting a look of mingled amazement and scorn upon her grandmother.

"I only meant to say," observed the Queen hurriedly—for she now repented of the remark which she had let slip in her rage,—"I only meant to say that Sophia has her faults as well as the rest of the world. But let us not bandy unnecessary words. As for your letter, this is the way I serve it!"—and seizing hold of the epistle, she crumpled it up and tossed it into the fire.

"Then am I debarred the privilege of writing to my own mother?" asked the Princess, her countenance now becoming deadly pale and her lips quivering with indignation.

"You may write as much as you choose," responded the Queen, "so long as you mention naught contrary to my views. An opposite course can only have the tendency of producing the suppression of your letters."

"Ah! then an English Princess is a slave," cried Charlotte, with flashing eyes, dilating nostrils, and swelling bust.

"Yes—a slave to the will that is paramount," replied the Queen, with the look of malignant triumph.

"But I would sooner be a beggar in the streets and enjoy freedom of action," exclaimed the outraged Charlotte, "than continue a Princess to be thus held in bondage!"

"We are not upon the stage of a theatre," said her Majesty: "and again I may remind you that you have not yet the opportunity of playing the tragedy-queen in all its reality. A truce, therefore, to these magnificent expressions and lofty complainings on your part. If you are disobedient, I shall know how to punish you, all princess and lineal heiress to the throne though you may be! For the present, if your life becomes one of prisonage and espionage, you have only yourself to thank for it. No more journeys to London, unless accompanied by me! Your rides, too, will be confined to the environs of Windsor; and if you order your coachman to proceed elsewhere, you will only subject yourself to the pain of refusal. As for this silly affair of enlisting Mr. Jocelyn Loftus in your projects," added the Queen with a sneer, "depend upon it I shall find means to put a stop to any such ridiculous proceeding; and when you next meet your aunt Sophia, the best thing you can do will be to remain silent on the subject. Now you understand me—and I wish you good night."

The young Princess made no reply, but turned away with swelling heart: and as the door closed behind her grandmother, she threw herself into an arm-chair and burst into an agony of tears.

"This, this indeed is slavery!" she murmured to herself. "I am as much enchained as any one of those poor and oppressed millions who are compelled to obey the despot rule of royal sway! The only difference between us is that *their* chains are of iron undisguised, while *mine* are gilt. Oh! my poor mother, am I indeed separated from thee by an impassable gulf!—may I not warn thee of the perils which the machinations of thine enemies are conjuring up around thee?—am I indeed a prisoner within these walls? But who will dare make me so?"

And rising from her seat with a sudden assumption of that dignified energy which so well became her, the Princess advanced towards the door. To her surprise the handle yielded to her touch: for she almost expected to find it locked. Then she paused, mistrustful as it were of being left thus far free: for she fancied either that the Queen was watching at the end of the passage, or that she had set spies upon her. But again recovering all her presence of mind, she issued forth from her room and proceeded along the passage, but without any definite aim.

Suddenly a thought struck her; and obeying the impulse of the idea, she knocked at the door of Mrs. Bredalbane's ante-chamber. The summons was almost immediately answered by Lady Prescott, who had not yet retired for the night, but was still keeping her invalid friend company. And here we may observe that her ladyship was a young widow, six-and-twenty years of age, and exceedingly good looking. Her beauty was of an oriental cast—her complexion was dark—her eyes were very fine—and her teeth were like ivory. As for her eyes—she now opened them wide with astonishment on beholding the Princess Charlotte returning thither after the taunts and reproaches she had received from the Queen.

"I wish to speak to you particularly," said the young Princess, passing into the ante-chamber. "Has Mrs. Bredalbane retired yet to rest?"

"No, your Royal Highness," said Lady Prescott; and hastening to draw aside the curtain in the doorway, she thus afforded ingress for the youthful Charlotte to the inner room.

"Now, ladies," said the Princess, coming to the

point at once, and addressing herself in an earnest and serious manner to Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott, "I have done you a service to-night and am about to crave a boon in return. The service which I rendered you was by forbearing from mentioning to the Queen that conversation which, to speak candidly, I overheard from the very first syllable of the narrative down to where it was so suddenly interrupted by the ejaculation which burst from my own lips on the appearance of her Majesty."

"Your Royal Highness heard all?" ejaculated the two Bed-chamber Women, as if speaking in the same breath.

"Yes—every syllable relative to my uncle Ernest—or the Duke of Cumberland, as I would rather call him," added the Princess, with a shudder: "for if the dreadful suspicions which I have formed be true, I would rather not acknowledge him as a relative."

"Your Royal Highness must not judge too hastily," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "The remainder of my narrative——"

"Well, I long to hear it," interrupted the Princess: "but I dare not remain here many minutes now. The Queen is perhaps watching me—espying my actions—and she may either return to my room——"

"O heavens! if her Majesty should have seen your Royal Highness come hither!" cried the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane. "She would discharge me at once——"

"No—the Queen did not see me come hither," said the Princess. "And recollect," she added proudly, "I may some day become Queen of England—and *then* I shall know how to reward those who serve me *now*."

"Your Royal Highness may command us in all things," said the two ladies, again speaking as it were in the same breath.

"A thousand thanks for this assurance!" exclaimed the Princess, in a tone of fervid gratitude. "Will you undertake to deliver or to forward a note from me to my aunt Sophia, as early as possible to-morrow?"

"I have obtained leave to go to London to-morrow morning," said Lady Prescott; "and I will undertake to deliver your Royal Highness's note to the Princess Sophia."

"Then give me pen, ink, and paper," exclaimed Charlotte, in a joyous tone.

Writing materials being accordingly supplied her, she sate down and penned a few hasty lines to her aunt: then having folded, sealed, and addressed the letter, she entrusted it to Lady Prescott, who solemnly reiterated her promise to deliver it next day.

"And now, dearest Princess," said Mrs. Bredalbane, in an imploring tone, "do pray return to your own chamber——"

"On one condition," exclaimed Charlotte: "which is, that you permit me to avail myself of the earliest opportunity to visit your room again, in order to hear the rest of your narrative—*and see that letter*——"

"Yes, yes—whenever your Royal Highness thinks fit," ejaculated Mrs. Bredalbane. "But for to-night—Oh! not for worlds would I say another word upon the subject—the Queen has alarmed me so——"

"Well, my good friend, you shall be alarmed no longer on my account," interrupted the Princess, with an amiable smile; and bidding the two ladies good night, she retraced her way to her own apartment.

There she retired to rest, to dream of her injured mother—Sellis—the Duke of Cumberland—the mysterious letter—the vixen Queen—and a host of fearful or unpleasant things, all confusedly jumbled.

CHAPTER CXIII.

THE PRINCESS SOPHIA AND HER BROTHER.

It was about one o'clock on the day following the incidents just related; and the Princess Sophia had only just risen from her couch. She had not gone through the complete operations of the toilet; but with her hair negligently gathered up under a French cap, her luxuriant form wrapped in an elegant robe-de-chambre, and her feet thrust into satin slippers, she had thrown herself upon a sofa drawn near the fire in the dressing-room communicating with her bed-chamber. Under the plea of having letters to write, she had dismissed her attendant-ladies for the present; but scarcely had the door closed behind them and she found herself alone, when she pressed both her hands to her throbbing, burning brows—as she murmured to herself, "Great God! the horrors of the past night!"

Then, with her head hanging back over the cushion of the sofa and her hands still pressed against her forehead, she remained for some minutes motionless and silent, in an attitude of blank despair.

"Oh! it was indeed a night of horror," she murmured to herself again, as she at length slowly raised herself from that posture and withdrew her hands from her aching brows. "Heavens! the misery of that moment when my eager looks plunged into the recess, will haunt me to the last hour of my existence! But wherefore does not my brother come? 'Tis one o'clock—and he promised to be here by mid-day."

As thus she mused, her eyes remained fixed upon the time-piece towards which they were turned: and as the light from the window, tinted with the roseate hue caught from the crimson curtains, fell upon her countenance with a sort of Rembrandt effect, it showed off her finely shaped but sensuous profile to its best advantage. That rosy-tinted light imparted, too, a delicate bloom to her magnificent bust, which the negligent wrapper left more than half exposed; and her whole appearance was that of a woman formed to experience the raptures of love, and to kindle to the highest degree the flame of enjoyment on the part of him who might share love's pleasures with her. But the barbarian law enacted to prevent the blood of Royalty from mingling with that of a subject, had prevented that woman, so luxuriant in form and so voluptuous in disposition, from experiencing the lawful joys of love in the connubial state, and had forced her to gratify the ardour of her temperament by illicit amours. Oh! the atrocity of the Royal Marriage Act!—did it not make harlots of nearly all the daughters of George III? And this tremendous demoralization was allowed to take place rather than permit any of those royal ladies to become the wives of British citizens! What an idea must the monster King have had of the richness of his family-blood, when he took so much pains to prevent it from mingling with that of an English subject! No doubt the best blood that flowed in the veins of the oldest members of the aristocracy, was but a plebeian puddle in his estimation. *His* family's blood indeed!—the idea of an Act of Parliament to protect that scrofulous, leprous, foully diseased blood from mingling with any other! Out upon the abhorrent mockery—let us heap loathing, hatred, and scorn upon the inhuman policy that devised the Royal Marriage Act!

To continue our narrative. The painful reverie of the Princess Sophia was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of one of her female attendants, to announce that her brother the Prince Regent wished to see her immediately. Gathering the wrapper closely around her form, the Princess desired that he should be at once admitted; and in a few minutes his Royal Highness made his appearance. But his countenance was severe and even stern; and his manner was cold as he took a chair opposite to the sofa on which his sister was seated.

"Something is wrong, George?" she at once exclaimed, a mortal terror seizing upon her. "Tell me what it is—keep me not in suspense! I suppose the wound has proved fatal——"

"No—your son lives, and the wound is not mortal," said the Prince. "In fact, everything connected with last night's adventure is satisfactory enough, so far as we are concerned. But at the very time that I was arranging plans to gratify your wishes in respect to your son, you were plotting and intriguing against me—aye, and with my own daughter too!"

"Ah! what mean you, George?" cried the Princess, flinging upon her brother a frightened look.

"Answer me one question immediately," he said, in a severe tone; and gazing upon her with a look which seemed to bid her beware how she deceived

or trifled with him, he asked, "Have you written to a certain person styling himself Jocelyn Loftus——"

"Then Charlotte must have betrayed me!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, the angry blood mantling upon her cheeks. "Oh! this is unkind—most unkind on her part——"

"No—my daughter is not a traitress of that ignoble stamp!" interrupted the Prince Regent. "But there is no necessity to practise any concealment nor affect any mystery in the affair. Charlotte penned a long letter last night to her mother—and that letter happened to meet the eyes of the Queen."

"Well, George," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, "I confess that I took compassion upon the distress of mind in which my niece was plunged—— But are you aware of the extent of *her* knowledge?—do you know that your daughter——"

"I know everything," said the Prince. "Charlotte listened to some discourse which was taking place yesterday morning between her grandmother and Mrs. Owen—and misunderstanding one portion, and allowing her excited feelings to exaggerate another, and indeed mistaking the whole drift of the conversation——"

"Can I really believe you, George?" asked the Princess Sophia, gazing up steadfastly into his face. "Because if you are telling me the truth, I should be so glad—so very glad—to learn that this conspiracy does not exist——"

"It does *not*," answered the Prince, with she most brazen effrontery: "nowhere except in the brain of my silly daughter. As a matter of course I have persons watching my wife's actions: that I have reason for doing this, you may believe or not as you choose. At all events," added the Prince haughtily, "I am the best judge of my own private affairs. But as for any conspiracy for accusing my wife of crimes whereof she is not guilty—or, in plain terms, of ruining an innocent woman—I pledge you my soul it is all a fable—a chimera."

And as the Prince gave utterance to this tremendous piece of perjury, he looked at his royal sister so steadily, so unblushingly, and with such an air of conscious integrity, that she was not merely staggered, but positively persuaded he was speaking the truth.

"I am glad, my dear brother—nay, more than glad—positively delighted," she said, "to hear you speak in this manner. I confess that I have written a letter to a certain Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, whose name Charlotte mentioned to me, and who is supposed to be at Canterbury."

"Then the best thing you can do," interrupted the Prince, "is to write another letter and unsay all you have penned in the first: and at all events, if he should happen to come up to London, you will do well not to see him—for he is a mere adventurer—a profligate young scamp——"

"Indeed! is this his character?" exclaimed the Princess, in astonishment.

"It is," returned her brother: "and he goes about under a false name, practising his iniquities and pursuing his debaucheries. It was on that account he was imprisoned in Paris. But enough upon this subject: promise me that you will interfere no more in the affair—and all will be well."

"I promise you faithfully," answered the Princess; "and I will this very day write to Mr. Loftus to the effect that my letter of yesterday originated in a mistake. Should he come up to London before my second letter can reach him, I will give orders that he be not admitted."

"You will act wisely," said the Prince; "and when you have an opportunity, I beg you to counsel my daughter, and use your influence with her to curb this rebellious spirit of her's, and not to give way to her own headstrong opinions. The Queen has sent me a long letter this morning about her: for it appears that some altercation took place between them last night. However, I shall now look out for a husband for Charlotte; and when she is married, she will perhaps be less a source of uneasiness and vexation to me."

"But she is so very young!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia.

"Young!" echoed the Prince Regent; "why, she is close upon eighteen years of age:"—then, bending a look of peculiar significancy upon his sister, he said, "The females of our family, Sophia, cannot be married too early!"

The Princess's countenance, her neck, and all that was seen of her shoulders, instantaneously became crimson as a peony: for those words smote her as a taunt and a reproach, her brother being well aware of her frailty.

"You might have spared that observation, George," she said, the tears starting forth upon her lashes.

"Well, well—I did not mean to afflict you," said the Prince, in a soothing tone. "It was a random remark, and not intended to wound your feelings. But now let me repeat for your consolation, that so far as the incidents of last night are concerned, we are safe enough."

"And he—the boy—my son," faltered the Princess, "is still at the surgeon's to whose house he was conveyed?"

"To be sure," returned the Prince. "You do not think that with such a wound, he could possibly be removed yet awhile. Besides, when he is convalescent where shall he be removed to? Not back to Fleet Lane——"

"Oh! no, no," exclaimed the Princess. "For heaven's sake never let him see that dreadful man again. Oh! the glimpse that I caught of his countenance was sufficient to make me shudder for the rest of my life, whenever his image starts up in my mind. But does he suspect—does he know who it was that thus swooned in the presence of that tragic spectacle?—did he, in a word, recognise *me?*"

"I do not think he did," answered the Prince: "but that he saw your face is probable, because your veil had blown aside where you fell."

"Tell me all the particulars," said the Princess: "give me those details of which I am as yet ignorant—how you got the boy away—whether any passers by saw you——"

"I will satisfy you in a few words," said the Prince. "Coffin had not joined me more than a couple of minutes at the extremity of the bridge, and scarcely had I paid him the amount agreed upon for the night's service, when a female rushed past. She had on a cloak and thick veil, and seemed poorly clad: but the frantic pace at which she was speeding along, instantaneously attracted the notice of myself and Coffin. At the instant she passed us her veil blew aside; and we caught a

glimpse of her countenance. It was known to us both! No matter who the female was: suffice it for you to know that we did recognise her as she thus swept past like a maniac, or like one in a state of frenzied horror. But she saw not us. Coffin was about to pursue her: for he had certain reasons for wishing to speak to her—and those reasons also accounted for her being there at that time of night. But at the same instant—just as Coffin was on the point of springing forward and catching her by the arm—a fearful scream came thrilling through the night air. '*Hark!*' exclaimed Coffin, clutching me by the arm: for we were both startled as suddenly as if the earth had been opening to swallow us up. But instantaneously feeling assured that something was wrong—struck by a presentiment that the shriek came from your lips—and not pausing to reflect upon the imprudence of bringing Coffin into contact with you, I sped along the bridge as if wings had suddenly fastened themselves to my feet. Coffin, who as well as myself had lost all further thought of that female who had swept past us so frantically, and whom we had recognized, was close at my heels. On gaining the recess, we beheld you lying senseless upon the pavement, and the youth inside stabbed with a poniard. The truth flashed to my mind in a moment: and it simultaneously occurred to Daniel Coffin with equal force. We knew—we understood—we comprehended it all! 'Twas the hand of the female whom I have mentioned that had done the deed!"

"Fortunate, then—Oh! most fortunate—was it for me," exclaimed the Princess, "that accident should thus have shown you who the base assassin was. Otherwise the most terrible complication of circumstantial evidence would have pointed at me. Oh! I shudder—I shudder, when I reflect upon the risk that I ran and the horrors I encountered last night! But who," suddenly demanded the Princess, "was the murderess? and what was the wretch's motive?"

"Restrain your curiosity on this point," said the Prince. "Suffice it for you to know that the female in question had some spite against Daniel Coffin; and hearing that he was to be upon the bridge last night, she availed herself of the opportunity, as she thought and hoped, to wreak her vengeance upon him—but by a fatal mistake she stabbed that unfortunate youth! There is no necessity to dwell upon these details. You do not require to be informed that on beholding the tragic spectacle I was seized with horror and dismay. Fortunately not a soul was passing at the time—and to snatch you up from the pavement was my first impulse. You opened your eyes—your veil was away from your face—and you caught a glimpse of the countenance of Daniel Coffin. Then you fainted again—and I placed you on the seat in the recess. The next moment I turned my attention to the youth, and drawing out the dagger gave it to Coffin. Blood flowed from his breast: but I covered the wound with my handkerchief, and a long gasp convinced me that the poor boy lived. At the same instant a hackney-coach was passing over the bridge: it was empty—we stopped it—the youth was lifted in—and I bade Coffin go with him to the surgeon's in Bridge Street. That surgeon is known to me—and I told Coffin what to say. The coach drove away—and I breathed more freely. All these hurried, exciting, bewildering details had occupied barely a minute. My attention was then again turned towards yourself: but you speedily recovered—and fortunately you were enabled to walk home."

"Fortunately indeed!" ejaculated the Princess: "for what would the dependants of the palace have thought had they beheld me brought back in a swoon? But having seen me safe in my own apartments, you then hurried off to the surgeon's ——"

"Yes—I sped to Mr. Barrymore's," resumed the Prince; "and ascertained that the youth was not past all hope."

"And though you were kind enough to come back to me with this assurance," observed the Princess, "yet was I unable to subdue the horror of my thoughts. But it must have been very late when you got to bed ——"

"It was barely one o'clock," said the Prince Regent: "and that is not late for me. Only I would much rather have to sit up at night for more pleasant purposes. However, I left you with the promise of returning at noon to-day—and if I am an hour or so later than my promise, it is because of the arrival of a courier with that unpleasant letter from our mother ——"

"But you have been to Mr. Barrymore's?" said the Princess, anxiously.

"I have already told you so," rejoined the Prince Regent. "The youth is out of danger—but still speechless. I invented some tale to account for my appearing in the matter—and the surgeon asks no questions. He is a discreet man. As for Coffin, I have not seen him since last night: but even if he did recognise you, it matters little ——for I have determined," added the Prince emphatically, "to rid myself of that fellow."

"But how?" inquired the Princess Sophia, somewhat uneasily—as if she thought there was to be more bloodshed.

"Oh! I have a plan cut and dried!" exclaimed the Prince. "Indeed, it was all arranged ready for carrying into operation last night—and had that fellow once reached the receiving-ship off the Tower, he would have suddenly ceased to be his own master. Yes—while your son was being placed on board one vessel for Canada, Coffin would have been shipped in another for the West Indies——Ah! it was splendidly arranged, I can tell you;—and the plan is only now delayed by these unforeseen occurrences — not altogether abandoned."

"I feel that I shall be more at ease when that dreadful man is out of the country," said the Princess.

"He soon shall be," rejoined the Prince. "And now I must take my departure. I have two matters to attend to this afternoon. One is a Privy Council, which is of little consequence: the other is a rehearsal for certain private theatricals, which is of very great consequence."

"Private theatricals!" ejaculated the Princess. "Where?"

"At Carlton House," responded the Regent. "Will you come? Only the very, very select—the choicest *élite*, so to speak—can be admitted: and therefore I have had tickets duly printed. Here are a few for your own use:"—and he flung down half-a-dozen upon the table.

"Oh! I could not think of attending," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, "with my mind agitated as it is! Take back your tickets——"

"No, no—you may choose to give them away to your very particular friends," said the Prince. "Besides, the representation does not take place until to-morrow night—and by that time your spirits will be better. Try and come—it will be so amusing!"

With these words the Prince Regent took his departure, leaving his sister in doubt whether this facility wherewith he turned from disagreeable topics to scenes of diversion, arose from a naturally irrepressible gaiety or from a thorough heartlessness. But while still in the midst of conflicting speculations upon the point, one of her maids entered to announce Lady Prescott.

CHAPTER CXIV.

VISITORS AT SAINT JAMES'S.

When the usual civilities were exchanged between the Princess Sophia and Lady Prescott, the latter presented her Royal Highness with the note which she had promised the Princess Charlotte to deliver. Sophia instantaneously recognised the handwriting; and opening the billet in a hurried manner, she read the following lines:—

"*Windsor Castle. Midnight.*

"I have just now had a cruel scene with her Majesty. That you will hear of it from other quarters is tolerably certain, inasmuch as the Queen has discovered that you, my dear aunt, have given me your sympathy and promised me your assistance in respect to my poor mother. I am very, very unhappy. Misfortunes seem to be gathering around me: and never, never did I so much require your consoling presence, your friendship, and your love. But wherefore do I not fly to you? Alas! I am now a prisoner at the Castle. My cruel grandmother—pardon me for speaking thus of your mother—has told me that I shall be a captive; and my very servants, when I ride out in my carriage or on horseback, are to perform the parts of spies, gaolers, and guards! It is only through the kindness of Lady Prescott that I am enabled thus to communicate with you. Come to me when you can: but pray do not let any steps the Queen may take, prevent you from seeing Mr. Loftus. If he should not respond to your summons, I implore you to seek some trusty messenger who will bear a letter of warning, which you must write, to my dear mother. Oh! do not fail in all this. My whole and sole trust is now in you, my dearest aunt! Do not write to me about these matters: all letters will assuredly be intercepted. But come to me when you can: for I am very, very unhappy!"

This letter was by no means calculated to sooth the troubled mind of the Princess Sophia: and when Lady Prescott had taken her departure, her Royal Highness fell into a painful reverie. As if her own cares furnished not sufficient food for her infelicitous meditation, she had now the sorrows of her niece to mingle with her own. But could it be really true that no conspiracy was on foot against the Princess Caroline?—could she believe the assurances which her brother the Prince Regent had given her upon this subject? She was inclined to do so, because it was no doubt difficult for a daughter to believe that her own mother—and that mother the Queen of England—would be engaged in such a plot. And yet the Princess still had her doubts and was tortured with cruel uncertainties: and she resolved to take no farther step in the matter until she had maturely considered it in all its bearings. She did not therefore write to Jocelyn Loftus a second letter according to her promise to the Prince Regent: nor did she issue any orders against his admission to her presence, should he call at St. James's Palace. Neither did she repair to Windsor to confer with her afflicted niece: but she postponed all farther proceedings until the morrow.

And when the morrow came, what did it bring forth? It was a little past noon and the Princess Sophia was seated in her drawing-room,—not in the negligée of a boudoir, but in an elegant morning costume,—when a footman entered to announce that a gentleman who gave the name of Mr. Loftus, requested an audience of her Royal Highness. The Princess hesitated for a few moments: but at length she resolved to see him—and dismissing the ladies who were in attendance, she ordered the domestic to introduce Mr. Loftus.

The moment Jocelyn entered the room, the Princess Sophia was struck with an impression entirely in his favour. It was not because he was so faultlessly handsome, of such a symmetrical form and fascinating appearance—although these qualifications might at any other time have had their weight with the Princess, whose temperament was sensuous even to a devouring fervour: but it was rather because the noblest thoughts were so indelibly stamped upon the young man's brow, and because the first look which he threw upon the Princess convinced her that the eyes which sent forth this glance were the index of a soul loftily chivalrous, sublimely magnanimous, and full of the most unsophisticated candour. Indeed, it was impossible to survey this young man and believe that he was otherwise than everything honourable and creditable to human nature.

With a sweet affability, the Princess Sophia requested him to be seated; and entering at once upon the subject which had brought them together, she said "I thank you, Mr. Loftus, for this prompt attention to my letter."

Jocelyn bowed, making some suitable answer; and the Princess continued—

"My letter was necessarily brief, for several reasons. In the first place, I was writing to a gentleman whose acquaintance I had not *then* the honour to possess; secondly, I knew not whether the letter itself would reach you, or into whose hands it might fall; and thirdly, I was not altogether sure that the information I had received concerning you might be correct."

"And may I ask your Royal Highness what that information is?" said Jocelyn.

"That you have interested yourself deeply in the affairs of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline—that you have suffered imprisoment in France on account of the chivalrous enterprise on which you have embarked—and that you have recently been rescued by some Englishmen from the hands of the French police agents."

"All this is perfectly true," said Jocelyn:—then, after a brief pause, and with some little hesitation, he observed, "Your Royal Highness will excuse me if I ask how all these facts became known to you?"

"I understand you, Mr. Loftus," said the Princess, a blush mounting to her cheeks; "you fear—and your apprehension is natural—that inasmuch as I am acquainted with all these particulars, I

must necessarily be in the conspiracy which you no doubt suppose to exist in respect to the Princess Caroline. But when you have read this letter, you will see that you have no ground for any such alarm."

Thus speaking, the Princess Sophia handed to our hero the letter which she had received from her niece the day before through the medium of Lady Prescott: then, so soon as Jocelyn had perused this communication, her Royal Highness proceeded to explain to him how the Princess Charlotte had overheard the conversation on the part of the Queen and Mrs. Owen.

"I am now convinced," said Jocelyn, "that your Royal Highness has really nothing to do with this dreadful conspiracy. But you will excuse me if at first I proceeded with perhaps more caution than courtesy——"

"You are quite right, Mr. Loftus," said the Princess. "But my brother, the Prince Regent assures me solemnly that there is no conspiracy at all——"

"From the lips of Miss Agatha and Miss Emma Owen," observed Loftus emphatically, "have I received the admission that they are both engaged in such a conspiracy. That their sister Miss Julia is likewise an accomplice, is beyond all question; and the youngest sister Miss Mary, now at Canterbury—as your Royal Highness has heard—can confirm the sad truth. Besides, numerous other incidents corroborate the existence of the conspiracy and point to the conspirators."

Jocelyn thereupon entered into a few hurried details connected with his imprisonment at the Prefecture—showing by the proposals which the Prefect had made him as the price of freedom, that such a conspiracy did positively exist, and that the conspirators must be chiefly personages of the highest rank and influence thus to have been able to set the machinery of French policeism and tyranny at work in respect to an Englishman whose only crime was harbouring the intent of warning the Princess Caroline against her enemies!

Sophia was convinced: all doubt and uncertainty vanished—and she perceived that her brother was wilfully perjured when he pledged his soul against the existence of this conspiracy. But there was still one point concerning which she required some little reassurance.

"Mr. Loftus," she said, "we are met to discourse on a serious subject, and we must stand upon no reserve with each other. You fancied just now that I might be one of the conspirators—and I have proved to you that I am not. Now I seek equal candour at your hands. I have been informed that you are not precisely honest in your present intentions—that you pass under a false name——"

A peculiar smile gradually appeared upon Jocelyn's classically chiselled lips as the Princess thus spoke hesitatingly and timidly: but it was a smile, not of conscious guilt preparing to veil itself under the mask of sophistry or effrontery—it was the smile of sublime confidence which the honourable and virtuous man puts on when he hears an accusation which he can easily explain or a calumny which he can readily refute. He thereupon entered into certain details which we are not permitted at present to reveal to the reader, but which the Princess Sophia heard with mingled astonishment and satisfaction—the latter sentiment being experienced because she was well pleased that a young man who had already made so favourable an impression on her mind, could prove not only that he was as honourable as he was handsome, but that his honour was of the most magnanimous and lofty description.

For a long time did they continue in earnest and confidential discourse. They viewed the position of the Princess of Wales in all its bearings: they scanned all its difficulties; and they studied all the obstacles which would have to be encountered by any one who strove to succour that unfortunate Princess.

"Know you," inquired Sophia, after a brief pause, "who those Englishmen were that assisted you to escape in France?"

"I am still entirely in the dark on that head," replied Loftus. "The only clue that I at present possess is confined to such meagre evidences as that one was called '*my lord*,' another '*captain*,' and a third *Robin*: but from certain particulars mentioned in a few notes which passed between me and my unknown friends just prior to my release, I have every reason to suppose that Miss Clara Stanley, the elder sister of the young lady to whom I am engaged to be married, was the instigatrix of my deliverance. I shall call upon Miss Stanley either this afternoon or to-morrow, and perhaps ascertain from her the whole particulars."

"Then, on your release," said the Princess, with an arch smile, "you did fly back to Canterbury to behold your Louisa?"

"Yes: and does your Royal Highness blame me," cried Jocelyn, "if I considered it to be my first duty to convince that dear girl of my safety ere I adopted some new project on behalf of the Princess Caroline? But I have only been in England three days: for within a few hours after my rescue in the manner I have described to your Royal Highness, I had to separate from my unknown friends, assume a disguise, and proceed on foot all the way to Havre, because I had no passport. At Havre I waited till I could obtain a passage for Southampton; and thence I travelled day and night to Canterbury, without passing through London on my way thither. But I am detaining your Royal Highness with my own private concerns, while I ought to be conversing only on the one grand subject of our interview. Had your letter not reached me at Canterbury, I should have started off again in a few days for the Continent—taking care, however, to avoid France. My idea was to pass through Belgium, and proceed along the Rhine——"

"And why not still adopt that plan?" asked the Princess. "I will furnish you with letters to my injured sister-in-law——"

"An idea struck me as I journeyed up to London yesterday on receipt of your Royal Highness's letter: and that is," continued Jocelyn, "if I could only procure an interview with the Prince Regent, I would appeal to him on behalf of his persecuted wife——"

"But he would not hear you!" exclaimed the Princess.

"Oh! I would force him to hear me," replied Loftus, his cheeks flushing with the generous enthusiasm that inspired his heart. "I feel that I should become so eloquent while pleading such a holy cause, that I am almost inclined to hope I should be en-

abled to produce some little impression upon the mind of his Royal Highness. At all events, if I failed, I should be cheered by the consciousness of having done my duty: and that very failure would nerve me with a determination all the more deeply fixed to defend the Princess Caroline against her enemies."

As Jocelyn Loftus was thus speaking, the eyes of the Princess wandered from his countenance to the mantel-piece in the vacant abstraction of her thoughts; and her glance encountered the admission-tickets which her brother had given her on the previous day, and which were now stuck in a card-rack by the side of the mirror.

"I have it!" she suddenly exclaimed. "There will be no harm in trying what effect your eloquence may have upon the Prince Regent. At all events, the experiment is one suggested by humanity, kindness, and the best of feelings. But I know that my brother will not voluntarily give you an audience——"

"If I could only meet his Royal Highness somewhere," exclaimed Jocelyn,—"if I could but obtain admission into Carlton House——"

"You shall—you shall!" ejaculated the Princess. "See—here is such a talisman as you require!"—and as she spoke her Royal Highness took one of the admission-tickets from the card-rack and handed it to Jocelyn, who received it with mingled gratitude and exultation.

He then took his departure, with a promise to call again at St. James's Palace on the following day.

CHAPTER CXV.

THE PRIVATE THEATRICALS.

THE reader will remember that magnificent saloon at Carlton House where the dance of the aristocratic young ladies took place, and whence there was a communication by means of a glass-door with an ante-chamber. This saloon was now fitted up as a private theatre. A stage had been erected with wings, shifting scenes, a curtain, foot-lights, trap-doors, and all the usual contrivances and arrangements belonging to efficient dramatic representation. On the floor were placed rows of cushioned seats; and along the sides, as well as at the extremity facing the stage, elegantly furnished boxes were erected. A door had been purposely pierced at the extremity, under the central boxes, to serve as an entrance for the audience; and it was covered with curtains of purple velvet having gold fringes that swept the floor. A place for the orchestra was built in front of the stage; and several pieces of music had been composed expressly for the occasion.

The ante-chamber adjoining the saloon was converted into a Green Room, an ascent of steps leading from the glass-door upon the stage. The whole arrangements had taken place under the superintendence of an eminent theatrical manager; and as money was never spared in gratifying the expensive whims and costly caprices of the Prince Regent,—a remark which may be applied without a single exception to all the members of Royalty from William the Conqueror down to the present day,—every requisite which gold could procure to perfect the elegance, the splendour, and the richness of this *bijou* theatre had been obtained.

At six o'clock in the evening the Prince Regent gave a sumptuous banquet to all the *amateur* actors and actresses who were to take part in the performances, as well as to a select number of persons who were to constitute the audience. At this splendid festival his Royal Highness wore a Court dress, with the Order of the Garter. On his right hand sate Lady Sackville—the brilliant Venetia—the glory of whose transcending charms appeared not only fit to bask in that blaze of light, but also calculated to enhance the dazzling lustre which, shed from the crystal chandeliers and reflected in the superb mirrors, flooded the banquetting-room. There also was Lady Curzon—another grand beauty belonging to the sphere of aristocracy and fashion. Miss Bathurst, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and her daughter Penelope were likewise there, thanks to special invitations sent them by Venetia; and through the interest of the Countess of Curzon, Lady Lechmere had likewise procured admission to this select circle. Lady Prescott, who was only in the second year of her widowhood, but had laid aside her weeds and was said to be looking out for another husband, was also present. In addition to these ladies, were at least twenty others—Duchesses, Marchionesses, Countesses, and Baronesses—very many of whom had at different times been honoured with the smiles of the Prince Regent and had bestowed their favours upon him in return.

We said that Venetia sat next to the Prince: but on her right hand was Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was however careful not to regard her with any undue familiarity that might betray the intimacy subsisting between them. The Earl of Curzon was also present; and at first he had felt a little piqued at not being enabled to find a seat next to Venetia—for he little thought that the Baronet had quite as much claim upon her favour as he himself could advance. Indeed, the Baronet's pretensions were in reality the greater: because, although they had both rendered Venetia signal services and each had received his reward, yet be it recollected that the Earl of Curzon had obtained that reward through a mistake in the famous boudoir-scenes, whereas Venetia had voluntarily and indeed designedly abandoned herself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. But if the Earl of Curzon had now failed to place himself next to Lady Sackville, he was somewhat indemnified by having the handsome and dark-eyed Lady Prescott on his right hand; and he soon found that the widow was not only very amiable, good-tempered, and entertaining, but that she also knew how to fling most mischievous sidelong glances from beneath the jetty fringes of her eye-lids.

Lord Sackville was of course present: and he was seated next to Lady Curzon, to whom he comported himself with a courtesy wherein there was an infusion of tenderness which the lady herself failed not to perceive, but which was not very generally observed around the table. The Marquis of Leveson was not amongst the guests: Venetia, who had superintended the invitations, had purposely omitted him—and the Prince was too much absorbed in the gaiety of the scene and the pleasures of the table to remark his absence. Besides, there was no lack of Dukes, Marquises, Earls, and Barons; and thus the brilliant company comprised about fifty guests, all bent upon

enjoying themselves during the evening to any extent that the general feeling might conventionally carry them.

At eight o'clock the ladies withdrew to take coffee in the drawing-room; and soon afterwards those who were to appear in the dramatic representation, retired to undergo the operations of the toilette. At half-past eight the gentlemen quitted the dinner-table and joined those ladies who still remained in the drawing-room: but at nine o'clock there was a general summons to repair to the saloon fitted up as the theatre. All those personages, male and female, who had been fortunate enough to procure admission-tickets were already assembled in the theatre; and when those ladies and gentlemen who had been the Prince's guests at dinner, but who were not to take part in the representations, made their appearance and took their seats in the boxes reserved for them, the entire portion allotted to the audience was filled with the most brilliant assemblage. Indeed, to gaze upon that scene where Court dresses and scarlet uniforms mingled with the elegant apparel of the ladies—where ostrich plumes and bird-of-paradise feathers waved above many a high and polished brow—where coronals of artificial flowers, wreaths of pearls, and tiaras of diamonds shone upon glossy hair or gave effect to hyperion tresses—where bright eyes reflected the light that poured down from the crystal chandeliers, and the crimson hue of the draperies imparted a roseate tint to that flood of lustre in which naked shoulders, bare arms, and half-exposed bosoms seemed dazzling as alabaster—and where stars, orders, and decorations shone upon the breasts of peers and officers, and jewels of incalculable price gleamed upon the dresses of the ladies,—to gaze upon this scene we say, was to feel the head turning with the bewilderment of intoxication and the eyes becoming dazzled with this galaxy of diamonds, ornaments, flashing eyes, and natural charms!

But oh! if at the same instant the thoughts could only have travelled to the dens of poverty on Saffron Hill, the haunts of squalor and of wretchedness in Spitalfields and Whitechapel, the abodes of vice and the resorts of crime in the Mint of Southwark, and the low neighbourhoods of demoralization and famine which lie in the vicinage of Westminster Abbey,—or if the imagination, at once taking a wider range and starting off to a greater distance, could only have pictured to itself the pale, pining, perishing factory-slave of Lancashire, or the toil-crushed, persecuted, and down-trampled miner of the North, or the poor labourer in the agricultural district, hugging the iron chain of serfdom through the brutalizing ignorance in which the despot's cunning purposely keeps him,—Oh! then what a hideous picture would the woes, the miseries, the sufferings and the wrongs of the millions have furnished in contrast with that scene of splendour, brilliancy, and luxurious ease presented to the view at the private theatre of Carlton House!

But to return to our tale. In the midst of that brilliant assemblage—or rather, retiring from where the blaze of beauty and of jewels was most dazzling,—almost shrinking, then, we might say, into the farthest corner—was one young gentleman who in his apparel, his looks, and his thoughts, constituted the sole exception to the splendour, the gaiety, and the innate profligacy which characterised all the rest. This young man was Jocelyn Loftus. Well dressed, it is true, in his usual genteel style, he nevertheless rejoiced in no ribband, star, garter, or other decoration. Neither was he accompanied by any lady who looked amorously upon him or suffered her knees to press against his own; nor did he take any real pleasure in the scene before him. At the same time, if he felt himself out of place there and in an unsuitable element, it was not that he was overawed by the presence of the Aristocracy, or that he was awkward or embarrassed as if amongst his superiors and betters. No—it was because his lofty mind contemned all the frivolity, the gaud, the grandeur, the pomp, and the display assembled and indeed personified there—it was because his elevated character made him despise that throng, brilliant though it were, as nothing more than a gathering of titled brigands and aristocratic demireps—it was because he regarded them all as the representatives, the votaries, and the supporters of a system which invests the few with inordinate wealth and plunges the millions into the direst poverty!

He was there only because he had a self-imposed duty to perform: he was there, also, by virtue of the admission-ticket which he had received from the Princess Sophia; and his object, as the reader already knows, was to seek the opportunity of an interview with the Prince Regent. But, Oh! as he glanced around upon those ladies of rank, wealth, and fashion—as he beheld the shameless exposure of their charms, observed the looks which they exchanged with the titled profligates respectively seated next to them, and saw them basking as it were in the voluptuous light which the devouring eyes of lasciviousness shed upon them in return—and as he unavoidably caught the tenour of the remarks which fell from rosy lips or were wafted in wanton whispers to greedily listening ears—he could not help thanking heaven that he had been gifted with courage, and sense, and virtue sufficient to enable him to abjure the atmosphere of fashion—that atmosphere which is like the south-wind of oriental climes, laden with the fragrance of earth's loveliest flowers, but bearing pestilence upon its wing!

But let us now glance into the Green Room where the *amateur* performers were by this time assembled. All the indelicacies of the real stage-costume—or rather, of the ballet-apparel at the Opera—had been adopted by these fashionable imitators. It would almost seem as if the positive agreement had been, or at all events as if the tacit understanding were, that the ladies who were to take part in the proceedings should be attired in a drapery as gauzy and as scanty as possible. Thus the fine person of Venetia was exposed to an extent that left little scope for the exercise of fancy and gave small opportunity for guesses. Not only were her fine plump shoulders completely bare, but the grand amplitude of her bust was revealed to the eye in a manner which outraged all modesty. Indeed, so large a portion of her bosom was left bare that it was by no means difficult for imagination to fill up the picture in all its voluptuous perfection. Her dress was not only thus low in the body, but it was equally scant in the skirt; and the splendid symmetry of her limbs

LADY PRESCOTT.

was accurately pourtrayed by the flesh-coloured silk that covered them with such tight-fitting accuracy. Her splendid arms, white and glowing, were naked to the shoulder; and thus was her superb form exposed so that every line could be traced—every deflection and inflection, every sinuosity and swelling charm, every curve and contour, could be faithfully followed by the gloating eye of the observer.

Lady Curzon, who had likewise undertaken a part in the performances of the evening, was apparelled in a manner to set off her own beauties to their utmost advantage. She wore her raven hair in ringlets, which showered like shining jet upon her finely-shaped shoulders: whereas Venetia had her auburn hair arranged in massive bands and ornamented with flowers. The other ladies who were to take part in the drama, were attired in dresses as gauzy and transparent as those of Venetia and Editha; and nothing could be more voluptuous—nothing better calculated to excite the most laggard passions or fire the fervid ones to frenzy—than this assemblage of beauties so sensuously, so shamelessly exposed! The Prince Regent retained his Court-dress, which became the character indicated by the piece for him to perform. Lord Curzon was disguised as an old astrologer: but Sir Douglas Huntingdon and several other noblemen and gentlemen who formed part of the *amateur corps*, retained the same apparel in which they had appeared at the banquet.

The opening piece was called *The King and the Sea Nymphs*, and had been written on purpose for the occasion. Its plot was meagre—its structure slight: but it abounded in brilliant and sparkling dialogue, and admitted of all the exciting effects to be produced by voluptuous *tableaux*.

But avoiding minute details as much as possible, let us resume the thread of our narrative and at once pass from the Green Room to the stage. A

silver bell tinkled; and the orchestra—for we should have observed that there was a splendid band present—played a piece of music that stole softly and wantonly upon the senses. Again the bell chimed, after a short space; and the curtain drew up, revealing the Prince Regent who appeared alone upon the stage. He was of course greeted with loud applause, which he acknowledged with that gracefulness of salutation which formed one of the qualities that had obtained for him the distinction of "the first gentleman of Europe." The stage represented *the interior of an Astrologer's house;* and from a soliloquy which the Prince delivered, it appeared that this *Astrologer* not only read the stars but also human hearts, and was consulted as much in love matters as upon any other subject. It farther appeared that the Prince, who represented the character of *King of the City of Pleasures*, had come thither for the purpose of ascertaining from the lips of the *Astrologer* which of the twelve mistresses whom he possessed, had proved faithless to him; inasmuch as he had intercepted an anonymous letter crammed full of love-protestations, but being without the envelope that had originally accompanied it he was at a loss to ascertain to which particular fair one it was addressed. Having thus made known, in the form of a soliloquy, the object of his visit to the *Astrologer*, the *King of the City of Pleasures* awaited the learned man's presence. Nor did he wait long: for in a few minutes Lord Curzon, clothed in the robes and wearing the cap of a sage, made his appearance; and having heard the *King's* tale, he proceeded to consult a huge book of magic, charms, and other cabalistic devices. Inspired with the suggestions of the great book, the learned *Astrologer* proceded to inform the *King* that if he laid down to sleep on a certain magic couch, the *Sea Nymphs* would come to talk to him in his dreams and answer all the questions that he might put to them. The *King* of course rewarded the *Astrologer* handsomely; and away he went. But scarcely had he disappeared from the stage, when Lady Curzon, enveloped in a cloak, representing *Adeliza*, one of the *King's* twelve mistresses, also came to consult the *Astrologer*. Her dilemma consisted in the loss of a note which she prized very highly and which she was fearful might fall into hands where the writing would be recognized. The *Astrologer*, laughing in his sleeve at the coincidence which greatly amused him, directed *Adeliza* to go and induce all her fellow-mistresses to dress up as *Sea Nymphs*, and watch for an opportunity when the *King* should be sleeping, to gather round him and play their practical jokes upon his Majesty: for the *Astrologer* assured her that if she did this and watched her opportunity to introduce her fingers into the *King's* right-hand waistcoat pocket, she would inevitably recover the lost note. Highly pleased with this advice, *Adeliza* bestowed a handsome reward on the *Astrologer*, and took her departure.

Such was the first scene of the drama; and it passed off to the infinite delight of all present—with the sole exception of Jocelyn Loftus, whose thoughts were bent on far more serious subjects. The curtain fell; and when it rose again the stage represented a splendid garden. The *King of the City of Pleasures* was now discovered reclining on the magic couch which the *Astrologer* had lent him, and which was supposed to be placed in the summer-house on the grounds belonging to the royal palace. The *Astrologer*, who was a funny fellow in his way, had contrived this magic couch to be as uneasy as possible; and the *King* amused the audience by many ejaculatory complaints uttered in the way which on the stage is called *aside*, but which means that such remarks are to be made louder than any others! And now, to the sound of delicious music, did the *Sea Nymphs* make their appearance, Venetia as their *Queen* bearing a wand in her hand.

But here we must interrupt the progress of our narrative for a moment, to observe that had it not been for the enthusiastic outburst of applause which welcomed Venetia and her fair companions, an ejaculation that fell from the lips of Jocelyn Loftus would have startled every one present. It was an ejaculation of utter amazement—an ejaculation which he could not have suppressed had the utterance of it cost him his life at the same moment! But fortunately for him it was lost and absorbed in the loud and prolonged welcome that greeted the train of aristocratic actresses.

Over the heads of the applauding throng that occupied the cushioned seats in what may be termed the pit of the theatre—from his retired corner, were the looks of Jocelyn fixed upon one of those lightly-dressed and semi-nude beauties representing the *Sea Nymphs*. Could it be possible?—was it indeed *she*—or only a wondrous, marvellous resemblance? And yet it was scarcely possibly to err? There was the same classic outline of the profile—the same grandeur of form—the same look; there were the same lips—the same unmistakable expression of the eyes;—and there also was the bright glory of the auburn hair!

A certain sickening sensation came over Loftus—a tightening of the heart-strings: and he felt as if he were almost about to faint. Passing his hand over his eyes, as if to dissipate any delusion that had started up before him, he again fixed his looks upon that resplendent creature who had thus so deeply, deeply absorbed all his interest: and the longer he gazed, the more convinced became he that it was no mere resemblance on the part of *another*—but *she herself*, whom he remembered so completely and so well!

But what name did she bear at Carlton House?—in a word, who was she? He was about to lean forward and ask the question of the gentleman who sat nearest to the corner where he had placed himself: but suddenly recollecting that on presenting his admission-ticket in the hall below, he had received a programme of the representations printed upon white velvet, he drew it abruptly forth from the pocket into which he had thrust it, and where it had remained forgotten until this moment. Hastily unfolding it, but with fingers that trembled nervously, Loftus looked to ascertain who was performing the character of *Queen of the Sea Nymphs*. But the velvet programme dropped from his hands as he read the name of LADY SACKVILLE!

"I understand it all now!" he murmured to himself, and sank back into his corner with feelings that defy all power of description.

For several weeks did he remain absorbed in reflections of a character as painful as they were conflicting. In the meantime the action of the drama progressed upon the stage, to the infinite delight of all present, save our astounded, dis-

mayed, and afflicted hero. Venetia, in the capacity of *Queen of the Sea Nymphs*, had to deliver several speeches replete with brilliant wit and sparkling humour; and these she enunciated in a style that, joined with the soul-seeking melody of her harmonious voice, produced a thrilling effect upon the audience. Lady Curzon's performance was also highly effective: and there was a scene where Venetia had to apostrophise the sleeping *King of the City of Pleasures*, during which *Adeliza* seized the opportunity to fall upon her knees and get back her note from the *King's* pocket. That portion of the performance elicited great applause: and it was just at this point that Jocelyn Loftus, awaking from his reverie, again fixed his eyes earnestly, attentively, and scrutinizingly upon Venetia in order to clear up any doubts which might remain in his mind relative to the idea he had conceived. But the longer he surveyed that splendid creature, whose animated complexion now gave increased brilliancy and effect to her faultless features, and who availed herself of every opportunity permitted by the part she was enacting to exhibit all the charming graces of her person and all the seductive witcheries of her exquisite beauty,—the less room was there for doubt. Indeed, as the music of her delicious voice floated through the warm and perfumed atmosphere of that brilliantly-lighted saloon, its accents, its harmony, its intonations, all fell familiarly upon Jocelyn's ear!

He was now seized with a sudden repugnance to remain in that place any longer. The atmosphere grew oppressive to him: it seemed as if he were breathing the air exhaled by all that is profligate, immoral, meretricious, and foul in the sphere of rank and fashion. He even felt as if he were committing a crime by lingering in so tainted an atmosphere. Seizing his hat, he resolved to take his departure at once; and accordingly issued forth by the door covered with the purple velvet curtains. But scarcely had he set foot on the landing outside, when he recollected that his whole and sole object in coming to Carlton House at all was to obtain an interview with the Prince Regent, and in this aim he did not wish to be disappointed. He therefore accosted a footman, saying, "I feel too indisposed to remain in the saloon any longer, but I am most desirous to say a few words to his Royal Highness before I take my departure. Will you be so kind as to show me to a room where I can wait until the representation is over?"

The footman instantaneously complied with this request, and escorted our hero to an adjacent parlour, where a lamp was burning.

"What name shall I mention to his Royal Highness?" asked the footman, as he held the door ajar.

"Give me writing materials, and I will pen a few lines, which you can hand to his Royal Highness immediately after the performance."

Jocelyn's request was obeyed; and having written a note earnestly and solemnly imploring an interview with the Prince, he folded, sealed, and gave it to the footman. The domestic retired—and our young hero, being left alone, relapsed into a train of gloomy reflections.

Thus three hours dragged their slow length away; and, in the meantime, let us see what was taking place in another part of Carlton House.

The performances were over, and the larger portion of the audience had taken their departure to their own residences: but the more immediate friends of the Prince—indeed, the same who had dined with him previous to the commencement of the amateur-representation — assembled in the supper-room, where an elegant repast was served up. The ladies who had figured in the performance, retained their gauzy raiment: and thus the board seemed to be embellished with the exposed charms and wanton looks of courtezans, rather than of ladies priding themselves on their lofty rank, and standing as it were on the highest pedestals of the social sphere.

As the wine circulated freely after supper, and the coral lips of beauty sipped the champagne-nectar of Epernay, the colour deepened upon the cheeks—the eyes flashed more brightly—the regards became more tender and more wanton—the conversation grew more free—and the little familiarities of friendly conviviality became enhanced into positive license. Venetia again sate next to Sir Douglas Huntingdon; the Earl of Curzon had managed to re-monopolize the handsome widow Lady Prescott, who, be it observed, appeared nothing loth thus to receive his attentions;—while the Countess of Curzon was again the companion of Venetia's husband, Lord Sackville. As for the Prince Regent, he drank so copiously that he was soon in a very agreeable state of intoxication; and thus devoting himself entirely to the bottle—or rather to the bowl of curacoa-punch—he ceased to take notice of his guests, and was taken little notice of by them. Jocelyn's note had been put into his hand; but after hastily scanning its contents, he consigned it to his waistcoat-pocket, and soon forgot all about it.

At length his Royal Highness fell asleep in his chair, and then the company began to break up. Lord Curzon conducted Lady Prescott to her carriage, and pressed her hand as he took leave of her, a pressure that was assuredly returned, though slightly and timidly perhaps. He then sought his own carriage, to which his wife had just been escorted by Lord Sackville; and as the Earl and Editha thus rode home together, a somewhat interesting as well as curious discourse took place between them. Of this, however, we shall say more anon. Meantime let us hasten to state that Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the other guests having all taken their departure, Lord and Lady Sackville withdrew to their own chamber—where they passed the rest of the night together in each other's arms, but inspired only by the appetite of passion and not by the tenderness of love.

The Prince had been left sleeping in his chair; but when the domestics aroused him for the purpose of *conveying* his Royal Highness to his chamber, he repelled their services—overwhelmed them with drunken oaths—and swore that he was as sober as any man in Christendom. Thereupon, one of the lacqueys ventured to remind him that the gentleman who had sent the letter was still waiting; and the Prince, having some vague and confused idea of the circumstance, declared that he would see Mr. Loftus without delay.

But in the meantime, was not Jocelyn wearied of thus waiting? Yes—nevertheless, he waited still, because he deemed it his duty to see the Prince if possible. It was now one o'clock in the morning:

more than three hours had passed—and nobody came. Fancying that himself and his note must have been alike forgotten, he was about to ring the bell—when the door suddenly opened. Jocelyn rose on catching sight of the Prince; but he was at the same moment struck with stupefaction on observing his Royal Highness stagger forward a pace or two—then reel sideway—then totter back as if about to fall—then stagger forward again—and then advance with a rolling, reeling, staggering gait, and in a zig-zag manner, towards the spot where Jocelyn remained transfixed. The truth became apparent enough—the Prince Regent was in a beastly state of intoxication!

Heavens, what a spectacle! His wig was all disheveled and awry, pushed completely round upon his head, so that the wavy curls which were usually worn in front, were now just above the right ear: his eyes were bloodshot—his cheeks flushed to a degree that seemed to portend apoplexy—his under-jaw hanging down, and thus giving an air of hebetation and stolid vacancy to his countenance. Add to these symptoms the disordered shirt-frill—the waistcoat unbuttoned and covered with vinous stains—and the hands thrust rakishly into the breeches-pocket, and the reader may form an idea of the pretty figure which his Royal Highness cut upon the present occasion.

Jocelyn was grieved as well as astonished. Yes—grieved, because he felt how deplorable was the political system that gave the country a beastly sensualist to rule over it—grieved, because his own noble pride as a man was shocked at beholding the utter degradation of one who had such golden opportunities of being the brightest ornament of his species—grieved, too, because he saw all in an instant how utterly useless were the pains he had taken to procure this interview.

"Well—eh—sir-rah, wha-a-t the deu-eu-ce has brought you here—eh?" faltered the Prince as he staggered up to Jocelyn, and then stood reeling, inclining, bending, and tottering, as if he were endeavouring to balance himself upon a tight-rope. "So you sent me—hic—a note-ote—eh?—beg-egging an inter—what the devil d'ye call it—hic—inter-view—that's it. Well-el—now you've got your wish—ish—and so out with it—hic—hic—damn this floor—it's so uneven—I can't keep-eep—my—my—bal—al—al—ance!"

And after several vain and ineffectual endeavours to keep his footing, and many noddings and bobbings of the head, the first gentleman in Europe tumbled heavily upon the carpet. Jocelyn's prompt impulse was to rush to his aid and lift the fallen Prince: but at the same moment his Royal Highness threw up the contents of his stomach all over himself and the carpet—and Jocelyn, ineffably disgusted, turned away, rang the bell violently, and quitted the room.

On the following morning, Jocelyn called upon the Princess Sophia, with whom he remained in deep consultation for upwards of an hour; and on taking his leave he returned to the hotel in Covent Garden, where he was in the habit of taking up his quarters when in London. There he penned a long letter, which he addressed to Lady Sackville, and which he forthwith despatched to Carlton House. He then ordered a post-chaise, and by ten o'clock in the evening once more entered the ancient city of Canterbury.

CHAPTER CXVI.

MATRIMONIAL STORMS.

It was the morning after the scenes and entertainments just described; and if we penetrate into the breakfast-parlour at the Earl of Curzon's house, we shall find his lordship and Editha lounging at the table, sipping their chocolate, and carrying on a broken kind of discourse with listless tone and idle manner, partly real and partly assumed.

"And so last night, while we were returning home in the carriage," said the Earl of Curzon, "you intimated that I paid a little too much attention to Lady Prescott——"

"I did not make the remark, Charles," interrupted Editha, "before you said something sneering and sarcastic concerning Lord Sackville's attentions towards me."

"Well, I only said what I thought," resumed the nobleman, stretching out his arms and yawning. "Sackville is a deuced handsome fellow; and I told you that I thought he was smitten with you—that was all."

"No—it was *not* all," said Editha, extending herself with a still more languid abandonment upon the sofa, or lounge, whereon she was reclining—her symmetrical form loosely enveloped in an elegant morning wrapper; "for you even intimated that I received his lordship's attentions with an apparent willingness——"

"I don't think I used the word *willingness*," observed the Earl. "I said that you might have shown him a little more coolness."

"No—*reserve* was the term, now that I recollect," interrupted the Countess; "and I told you in reply that it is not in my nature to appear distant and reserved to any friend or acquaintance, unless it were to resent a marked insult."

"Yes—I recollect your saying all that," observed Lord Curzon; "and I think I expressed my opinion that Lord Sackville's very conspicuous attentions were *not* received as an insult."

"Assuredly not," responded Editha, still maintaining a tone and look of listless indifference, although in reality she began to be piqued at the under-current of satire which perceptibly ran through her husband's discourse. "Received as an insult, indeed! how could you have thought such a thing? Did Lady Prescott receive *your* attentions as an insult?"

"You asked me that question in the carriage last night," observed Lord Curzon.

"And you told me," said Editha, her lips now curling with a perceptible sneer, "there was not the slightest resemblance between the two cases."

"No more there is," ejaculated the Earl, beginning to get excited. "Lady Prescott is a widow, and may be permitted a certain license: she is not to be expected to enact the prude ——"

"At all events your lordship seems to expect that she should not," interrupted Editha. "But it is ridiculous to suppose that *you*, on the one hand, and in the presence of your wife, may lavish your most tender assiduities—indeed, I may say amorous and truly significant attentions—upon a very beautiful widow,—while I, on the other hand, am to be called to an account for merely accepting the most ordinary courtesies."

"But you said all that in the chaise last night," cried the Earl.

"To be sure I did! But are we not recapitulating that very interesting and edifying discourse?" said Editha.

"But why recapitulate it?" demanded the Earl, impatiently.

"Most assuredly it was not I who commenced it," ejaculated the Countess, her cheeks flushing and her whole manner denoting a rising pettishness. "Let me tell you once for all, that I only behaved with common courtesy and politeness towards Lord Sackville. I gave him no encouragement whatsoever: I defy a single soul seated around that table, from the Prince down to ——"

"The Prince indeed!" exclaimed Curzon, with an ironical laugh. "He was as drunk as an owl—and looked very much like one too, lolling in that arm-chair ——"

"Yes—Lady Sackville must have a singular taste," observed Editha, with a contemptuous toss of her head, arising from ill-concealed jealousy, "to allow such a loathsome monster ——"

"Nonsense! you don't think so in your own heart," said the Earl. "I dare say if the truth be known, you would give ten years of your life to change places with Lady Sackville and become the Prince's mistress."

"How dare you insult me, my lord, in this manner?" demanded Editha, but with a passion that was not so well affected as altogether to deceive her husband. "In fact, what cause have I given you to address me in the style which you adopted in the carriage last night and which you are renewing now? I repeat that I only received Lord Sackville's attention with a becoming courtesy; and when the company got heated with wine and began to indulge in certain little freedoms—innocent as your lordship doubtless considers them to have been," added Editha, with a fine vein of sarcasm in her accents, "Lord Sackville abstained from adopting the same course towards me; whereas you did not hesitate to kiss Lady Prescott ——"

"'Twas a mere kiss snatched in fun," observed Curzon.

"Lips are not glued together in jest," rejoined Editha, her eyes flashing the spirit of the sarcasm which her words conveyed: "nor does the hand rest upon the naked shoulder unintentionally—nor, when withdrawn, glide accidentally over the heaving bosom ——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl; "do you mean to tell me that all this took place between Lady Prescott and myself?"

"I mean to say that it took place from you towards Lady Prescott," replied Editha; "but I may add that her ladyship, ashamed at what thus took place, though perhaps in her heart not altogether unwilling, looked the prude and affected to be shocked. In plain terms—if I must repeat what I said to you in the carriage last night—your conduct was infamous, and mine was irreproachable."

"And I tell you in return," exclaimed the Earl, now getting too angry to persevere in a tone and manner of listless indifference, "that your conduct towards Sackville was not so innocent as you would have me believe. When he helped you to wine and you held your glass, I saw his hand rest upon your's with an amorous pressure that was perceptible enough to any one who understands these things——"

"Ah! your lordship is such a proficient," ejaculated Editha, with a taunting laugh.

"You shall say so before I have done," rejoined the Earl; "for if you did not kiss each other when in a moment of good humour kissing went all round the table, yet you sat so close to each other that I could see as well as possible his knee pressing against your's; and I have no doubt that *your* feet were talking mutely though eloquently enough to *his* under the table. I know you are as deep as a well, Editha—as profound a hypocrite as ever woman was; but nevertheless you could not last night altogether veil the real state of your feelings from me. I saw your bosom heave and fall with sensuous palpitations; I could even follow the occasional thrill of rapture which swept through your form, doubtless when in contact with the knee, the foot, or the elbow of your companion;—I marked when he whispered some hurried word in your ear, and which little episode in the tender drama would have passed unnoticed, had not the rapid movement of *his* head been followed by the quick blush mounting to *your* cheeks;—and ever and anon too I caught the veiled look which your eyes flung sidelong upon the glowing countenance of Venetia's husband."

"I have listened silently, but I cannot say patiently, to this long tirade," commenced Editha, in a voice that was tremulous with conflicting emotions; "and I can only say that in return for your gratuitous accusations, your vile imaginings, and your wicked interpretations of the most innocent looks and gestures, that you are a liar and a coward——"

"Liar!" ejaculated the Earl, his olive-tinted cheeks becoming red as a peony.

"Aye, liar!" echoed the Countess. "And it is not the first time that I have called you this name! You have accused me of forgeries—you have accused me of adulteries——"

"Yes—and they are all true!" thundered the Earl, now springing from his seat and dashing his hand violently upon the table.

"Coward—dastard! you had to apologise for those accusations," said Editha, her lips white and quivering with rage, and her eyes flashing as if pieces of jet could fling forth fire.

"There shall be an end put to all this," exclaimed the Earl. "I will have a divorce!"

"No—you shall *not*," ejaculated Editha, in a tone of defiance. "I am not going to humour you thus far," she added bitterly. "Besides which, you are too sensitive about what you call your *honour*, to proclaim yourself a cuckold until you hold the proofs of my infidelity in your possession!"

"Trust not too much to your own devilish hypocrisy," exclaimed the Earl; then with accents of bitter taunting, he added, "I dare say your sisters, your aunts, and your mother, all thought they were equally secure when playing their amatory tricks——"

Editha sprang up from the sofa like a Fury—her cheeks crimson, her eyes flashing lightning-shafts, her nostrils dilating, her lips apart quivering gaspingly, and her whole person vibrating as it were with the rage of a panther. Like a panther, too, did she appear ready to spring with her lithe and supple form upon her husband, who, startled and

terrified for the moment, stepped back a pace or two: then suddenly turning upon his heel, he burst into a forced laugh, exclaiming, "Admirably assumed, 'pon my honour! 'Tis as good as the play at Carlton House last night."

"Assumed!" said Editha, in a voice of stifling fury.

"Yes—assumed!" rejoined her husband. "You would do well for a tragedy-queen: your rage is admirable!"

"Ah! you dared talk of a divorce just now," cried Editha; "but if there be a divorce between us, it shall be at *my* instigation against *you* for cruelty, ill-treatment, and adultery."

The Earl of Curzon indulged in another affected laugh, and then slowly sauntered forth from the breakfast-parlour. Proceeding to his own chamber, he dressed himself, and was about to take his morning's ride on horseback, when a footman announced that a young man was waiting to see him, but that he had declined to give any name as he said he called upon his lordship by appointment. The Earl, wondering who it could be, immediately repaired to the room in which the visitor was waiting; and the moment he entered he recognised Theodore Varian.

"Ah! you were to have called upon me," exclaimed the Earl. "It was ten days ago that I met you in Nicholas Lane, and you promised me——"

"Yes, my lord—I promised to call, it is true," said Theodore; "but when I explain to your lordship the reasons which have hitherto delayed me, I am certain to obtain your lordship's forgiveness."

"Speak, then, young man," said Curzon; "and let me hear what you have to say."

"When I met your lordship in the City, ten days ago," proceeded Theodore, "I was about to call on the villain Emmerson and overwhelm him with reproaches. I entered the office—I forced myself into the presence of that man who has been my mortal enemy. On beholding me he quailed: his iron nerves gave way; his rigid features relaxed—he was afraid! Oh! it was guilt trembling in the presence of outraged, persecuted innocence! Then did I overwhelm him with a torrent of invectives, or rather with a flood of reproaches. He was, of course, previously aware that I had received a full pardon; he knew therefore that I had found powerful friends—and doubtless he thought it more politic to conciliate me than to take the high tone and eject me from his office. He accordingly bade me sit down, and begged me to talk the matter calmly over with him. It instantaneously struck me that he meant not merely to make his peace with me, but to invite me to resume my situation in his employment. I accordingly affected to grow calmer: I sate down and listened to what he had to say. He began by declaring how sorry he was that he should have gone to such lengths against me, and expressed his readiness to make all possible amends for his harshness. I let him know that it was through the kindness of Sir Douglas Huntingdon I obtained my pardon: for that gentleman indeed was the author of it——"

"Ah! Sir Douglas?" exclaimed Curzon. "He is an intimate friend of mine."

"And he is my benefactor," said Theodore. "However, to make a long story short, my lord," he continued, "I must inform you that when Mr. Emmerson heard who was my influential patron, he seemed more than ever contrite for his past behaviour, and said that if I considered his taking me back into his service would be the means of establishing a complete retrieval of my character, he would cheerfully allow me to return. In my own heart I at once resolved to accept this proposition, because I perceived the opportunity it would afford me for carrying out an implacable vengeance: but I pretended to hesitate ere I accepted the offer, and indeed raised some difficulties. But these Mr. Emmerson speedily overruled; and we ended by renewing our engagement."

"But what on earth could have induced him to take you back?" demanded Curzon.

"Because he sees that I have obtained influential friends; and it is in the man's nature to court those who are thus situated: because also he wishes to have it trumpeted forth that he is a true Christian and can forgive those who have injured him: because, likewise," added Varian bitterly, "he knows that I possess a sister whose good looks have already excited his unhallowed passions. These are his motives for taking me back. The cold calculation of selfishness has prompted *him* to offer me my old situation: a ferocious thirst for revenge on *my* part has prompted me to accept of it!"

"And you have been with him ever since?" said the Earl, interested in the conversation because he not only owed Emmerson money, but the name of that individual was also mixed up in the affair of Colonel Malpas. Editha, and the forged bills—an affair which, as the reader will recollect, was still involved in so much mystification for the Earl.

"In consequence of resuming my duties in the City," continued Varian, "I had to find a convenient residence; and the bounty of Sir Douglas Huntingdon has enabled me to take a neat little house and furnish it comfortably. My sister is installed there; and we are once more tolerably happy. But all these circumstances have so occupied me that I have not been able to call upon your lordship until now: and indeed I do not know that I should even have been able to find time to come to your lordship at all—at least for the present—had it not been for a certain circumstance ——"

"And that circumstance?" said the Earl, with a sort of presentient anxiety.

"I dare say," observed Varian, with some little degree of hesitation, "that your lordship wonders why I should have made a confidant of you so readily in respect to the vengeance which I cherish against Emmerson—my resolve to wreak it—and consequently my motives for resuming my employment in his office."

"Well, it does seem strange that you should have spoken so very, very frankly," remarked the Earl: "but perhaps you will explain yourself."

"I will, my lord," said Varian. "As a matter of course, your lordship can understand me well when I tell you that the man who is pursuing another with unrelenting rancour, seeks every opportunity to inflict the cherished vengeance. He will listen at doors—peep through key-holes—search amongst papers—pry into letters——"

"Ah! I do indeed understand you," said the Earl, with a growing presentiment that he was about to hear something relative to himself. "You

have done all this?—you have made some discoveries of an important nature?"

"Yes, my lord:" and Theodore looked steadily but significantly in the nobleman's face.

"Ah! I understand you," said Curzon, trembling with anxiety and suspense. "You have made some discovery that regards *me?*"

"I have, my lord. But ——" and Theodore hesitated.

"You fear that it will be disagreeable?" said the Earl, with quivering lip.

"Disagreeable! it will be worse, my lord—for unless you have any previous suspicion, it will be positively startling—perhaps overwhelming."

"Speak, Mr. Varian—speak! for God's sake, speak!" said the Earl in a hoarse voice; and leaning forward on his seat, he looked Varian earnestly and searchingly in the face.

"But it will be terrible—very terrible, my lord ——"

"Speak, I say—speak, I conjure you! Only be sure that you tell me the truth: and whatever you tell me, you must prove."

"Then listen, my lord," resumed Varian: and after gazing slowly round the room, as if to assure himself that there was no place where anybody might be concealed, he said, "Prepare yourself, my lord, to hear something about her ladyship—your Countess ——"

"Ah! 'tis as I thought," ejaculated the Earl, but in the subdued tone of caution. "I was not altogether unprepared for this announcement. Go on—you see that I am no longer excited—fear not to speak! What discoveries have you made?—what proofs have you obtained?"

"Happening to glance, my lord, over Emmerson's cheque-book," continued Theodore, "I was struck by observing on the counterfoil the name of Lady Curzon for several sums of considerable amount ——"

"Ah! she has had much money lately," exclaimed the Earl, the mystery now suddenly being cleared up: "but she told me she had it from her sisters. Go on—what next?"

"Considering that this was somewhat strange, inasmuch as I knew that your lordship had also obtained loans from Mr. Emmerson, my curiosity was piqued; and on minutely examining the contents of a private drawer in Emmerson's desk, which I opened by a skeleton-key—for you perceive, my lord, that I am systematic, persevering, and methodical in following up my vengeance——"

"Yes, yes," said the Earl, impatiently. "But what found you in the secret drawer?"

"A letter, my lord, from Lady Curzon to Mr. Emmerson," answered Theodore: "a letter the contents of which leave no doubt as to——"

"Go on, go on: you hesitate?"

"Oh! it is natural to hesitate when about to assure a husband of his wife's infamy. And now, my lord," added Varian, "I cannot speak more plainly."

"Heavens! then I am indeed dishonoured," said the Earl, in a deep and ominous voice, while his cheek blanched, his brows became corrugated, and his hands clenched involuntarily. "But that letter—what said it?—where is it?—have you brought it?"

"No—I have not, my lord," replied Varian. "I dared not abstract it; for if it were missed, the whole current of Emmerson's suspicions would be turned upon me. But that the contents of that letter are damnatory enough, your lordship may judge when I tell you that allusion is made therein to the meetings of the Countess and Mr. Emmerson at an infamous house in Soho Square."

"Mrs. Gale's! I know it well," exclaimed the Earl. "But is it possible that my wife has abandoned herself to that grovelling muck-worm—that base-born money-grubber?"

"It is possible—it is true, my lord," returned Theodore, impressively. "But the reason that I have come to you this morning is connected with this matter; and as Mr. Emmerson fortunately sent me to the West End, I have found this opportunity ——"

"What else have you to communicate?" demanded the Earl. "Of course the business cannot rest here. Not for a day—not for an hour—scarcely even for a minute can I restrain my fury!"

"Patience, my lord," interrupted Varian, "and listen to me. Ere I quitted the office just now—that is to say at about half-past ten o'clock—Emmerson sent out several letters by the boy to the twopenny-post. I seized the opportunity of glancing over the addresses, and saw that one was directed to her ladyship the Countess of Curzon——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl: "then may I obtain a proof of her frailty. You say the letter was posted an hour back?"

"Yes, my lord: and therefore in about a couple of hours more it will be delivered at this house. Can you not intercept it? can you not obtain it from the postman?"

"I will wait for him in the street," said the Earl.

"And if," hastily resumed Theodore, "it should prove to be a letter which, after reading, you should wish still to reach the hands of her ladyship, your lordship can re-seal it: for here is a piece of Emmerson's own sealing-wax, and here is a bread seal with his crest upon it. Ah! my lord," added Varian, as he handed Curzon the wax and the seal, "you perceive that I have neglected no detail—however minute, however insignificant—in following out my vengeance."

"But in what way, Mr. Varian, can I reward you for giving me this information?" asked the Earl.

"By crushing the scoundrel Emmerson," responded Theodore with a look of diabolical ferocity: "by overwhelming the miscreant so soon as he is placed in your power! Cover him with infamy—unmask him as a vile seducer and infamous adulterer—prosecute him in the law-courts—obtain damages against him—show him no mercy—seize his goods, seize his person—plunge him into gaol—aye, and keep him there till he rots—till he rots—and dies—dies miserably!"

The emphasis with which Theodore Varian gave utterance to these words, with an increasing power of accentuation as he proceeded, conveyed even a more forcible idea than did his ferocious looks, of that diabolic thirst for vengeance which wrung his soul as with a strong continuous agony. Even the Earl of Curzon, who was himself prepared for the consummation of a fearful revenge, gazed with mingled awe and terror upon that young man whose handsome person suddenly became hideous in fea-

ture and quivering in every limb as if shaken by the convulsive throes of some devil that had entered into him.

"Yes," said the nobleman, recovering himself, and even catching the infection of Theodore's utter implacability; "my vengeance shall be terrible. But if it be necessary to obtain that letter which you saw in Emmerson's desk——"

"Then you shall have it," returned Varian: "and anything else you require and that I can do for you shall be done—provided you promise me that the miscreant Emmerson shall receive at your hands, no more mercy than Satan will bestow upon the soul which he has purchased as his own."

"Stay one moment," said the Earl, as Varian was hurrying to the door. "You promise to serve me upon one condition—and that condition I solemnly undertake to fulfil. But let us join our vengeances—let us unite our forces, so as to strike whomsoever and wheresoever retribution ought to be inflicted."

"Be it so, my lord—be it so!" exclaimed Varian, labouring under a strong excitement. "It is a compact: we will make common cause together;—and so long as utter, immitigable ruin—consummate destruction—shall overtake that monster Emmerson—the man who has deprived me of my good name—who has made me hate myself—who has stamped me with the infamy of Newgate—and who, more than all *that*, sought to ruin my poor sister and to make me, her brother, the author of that crowning turpitude,—so long, I say, as utter ruin shall overtake this man, I am content! Speak then, my lord," added Theodore, in a more collected tone; "and tell me what else you have in view."

"Young man," said the Earl of Curzon, clutching Theodore forcibly by the arm, and holding it tight and serried as if in an iron vice; "you know what wrongs are, for you have experienced them—you know what a sense of dishonour is, for you smart under it—you know what a thirst for vengeance is, because your own is insatiable. Conceive, then, what must be my feelings towards any and all who have had a share in dishonouring me! My wife is a party to that dishonour—the authoress of it—the accomplice—the one, in fact, through whom the blow is struck. She then must be punished! Emmerson is another. But there is still another——"

"Another, my lord! Whom mean you?" asked Theodore.

"Search you, my young friend, amongst your master's papers," responded the Earl; "and ascertain if you can, whether the name of Colonel Malpas may in any way transpire in connexion with my wife——."

"Ah! now I remember!" ejaculated Varian, a thought striking him. "The letter of the Countess to Mr. Emmerson alludes to certain bills which she had given to Colonel Malpas, and which she acknowledges to have received back again by private messenger from Mr. Emmerson."

"Then the plot is all unravelling itself," said the Earl, rubbing his hands with a demoniac glee. "The plausible smooth-faced rascal—to invent so fine a story about those bills! When I called upon him the other day in the City, he actually staggered me for the moment. But he must be as consummate a dissembler as my wife is a finished hypocrite. However," exclaimed the Earl, suddenly abandoning that musing tone; "'tis for you to procure the letter for me when the time comes—or any other documentary evidence you can obtain—in order to bring the case home to Malpas as well as to Emmerson; so that I may not only avenge myself on my wife's paramours, but heap infamy upon infamy on the head of that guilty woman herself!"

"I will serve you to the utmost of my power, my lord," said Varian: and he then took his leave of the Earl of Curzon.

CHAPTER CXVII.

THE APPOINTMENT.

We must now return to Editha, whom we left in the breakfast-parlour after that scene of altercation and strife which she had with her husband. She remained alone for upwards of half an hour, pondering upon all that had just taken place, and likewise bestowing some of her mind's attention on the seductive qualifications of Lord Sackville. Presently her reverie was interrupted by the entrance of her faithful dependant—the handsome, courageous, and mischievous-looking Gertrude, who came to inquire whether her mistress had any commands to give her relative to her toilette.

"No—not at present, my dear girl," answered Editha, who always treated her abigail in an affectionate manner when they were alone together. "I have had a frightful scene with the Earl just now. All his *old* suspicions are revived, and *new* ones have sprung up. He has threatened me with divorce—exposure—and heaven knows what: but all these heroics I care nothing for, because I am well assured that he will never take any step until he has the fullest proofs in his possession—and those proofs, Gertrude," she added with a laugh, "he never shall obtain!"

"And your ladyship says," observed the abigail, "that his lordship has conceived new suspicions? Surely your ladyship has not——"

"Embarked in a new amour—eh?" said Editha, laughing still more merrily than before. "But indeed I *have*, my dear Gertrude. No harm is done as yet, however: but I cannot say how soon there will be. 'Tis Lord Sackville—and you must admit that he is a very handsome man."

"Yes—I have seen him here once or twice when he was plain Mr. Sackville. But for heaven's sake take care, my lady, since the Earl's suspicions are aroused."

"Oh! he not afraid! I will take care," observed Editha. "But to speak frankly, it is somewhat unfortunate that the Earl should have conceived these suspicions this morning; for to tell you the truth Lord Sackville last night requested permission to write to me, and in yielding assent I charged him to be sure and send his letter by the post—not by private hand—and to send it to so that I might receive it about one or two this afternoon. Now, if the Earl should take it into his head to intercept my letters——"

"Oh! if that is all your ladyship apprehends," exclaimed the ready-witted Gertrude, "we will manage that: for I will myself go and watch for the postman presently at the end of the street."

"Do so, my dear girl—for that is what I call making sure doubly sure."

We need not however dwel. any .onger u. .n this dialogue which took place between the profligate Editha and her crafty maid. Suffice it to say that a couple of hours later Gertrude issued forth, and proceeded up the street to watch for the postman. In a short time she beheld him advancing from Bond Street; but just as she was hurrying towards him, what was her dismay on beholding the Earl of Curzon himself hurry past her and stop the letter-carrier!

That her master had not recognised her, was her first impression. At all events, even if he had, he took no notice of her; and as she was of course anxious to avoid being seen loitering about in the street, she retreated to a little distance, though still watching what took place between his lordship and the postman. And now her heart sank within her as she beheld the letter-carrier place several missives in the hands of the nobleman; and he, immediately on receiving them, turned back and retraced his steps towards the man; Gertrude, evidently unperceived by the Earl, sped across the street and turned a little way up a stable-yard so as to avoid him: then watching until he entered the house, she hastened in pursuit of the postman, who was delivering correspondence from door to door.

"Have you any letters for Lady Curzon?" she inquired; and with all her spirited effrontery, she was unable to subdue the blush that conscious duplicity sent up to her cheeks.

"There were several letters for Curzon House, Miss," answered the postman: "but the Earl himself just met me and took them."

"Were there any for her ladyship?" asked Gertrude, scarcely liking to put the question.

"Yes—there were two," was the response: and away sped the postman, giving his sharp double knocks and delivering his correspondence along the street.

With a tightening sensation at the heart—for she completely identified herself with the affairs of her mistress—did Gertrude hurry back into the man-

sion: and great was the consternation which Editha experienced on learning how her husband had waylaid the postman and intercepted the letters. A quarter of an hour elapsed in hurried, anxious, and bewildered discourse between Lady Curzon and her faithful abigail—both dreading lest an explosion should be imminent, and each suggesting a dozen different plans for meeting any emergencies or contingencies that might arise. But at the expiration of that interval, which though so brief was nevertheless full of painful apprehensions, a footman entered the parlour—handed two letters to her ladyship upon a silver tray—and then quitted the room again.

"Two letters?" hastily observed the lady's-maid the moment the door closed behind the footman: "and the Earl has doubtless read them both! But are the seals broken?"

"No," returned Editha, carefully scrutinizing the letters ere she opened them. "Here is one from Emmerson: it is his crest upon the seal. But what a quantity of wax he has used! These City people are so very ungenteel in many things! But, Ah! this other letter is from Lord Sackville. I do not know his writing; but I know the arms he has assumed since he was raised to the peerage. Ah!" suddenly ejaculated Editha, in an altered tone: "this letter has been opened! See—here is the place where the wax has been broken and then re-fastened. 'Tis cleverly done, no doubt: but my eyes are sharp as needles——"

"Yes—'tis clear enough, my lady," said Gertrude: "that letter which you say comes from Lord Sackville, has been most certainly opened. And perhaps," she immediately added, as a thought struck her, "the other one has been opened too and re-sealed, which may be the reason why there's so much wax."

"Well, of course, if the Earl intercepted the letters, it was for the purpose of opening them," said Editha, in a musing tone: "and if, having resealed them, he has allowed them to reach my hands, it is that through their means I may be drawn into some snare which will place me entirely in his power. We shall see! And now for the reading of the letters. We will take Emmerson's first, as it may be upon business—whereas I know that Sackville's is about love."

The Countess of Curzon accordingly proceeded to break open the money-broker's letter, the contents of which ran as follow:—

"Nicholas Lane, December 11, 1814.

"I write to you, my dear Editha, because it is absolutely necessary that I should see you, in consequence of a certain communication I have received from that scoundrel Malpas, who having tried all kinds of subterfuges to get out of the King's Bench, has now with characteristic villany hit upon a scheme which he has imparted to me and which is more or less alarming. For heaven's sake, then, give me an appointment at your earliest convenience—not only for the reason just mentioned, but also that I may enjoy the ineffable bliss of clasping you, my sweet Editha, once more in my arms. I anxiously await your response. Oh! delay it not. I live only for you, my dear Editha. By the bye, how get you on with the Earl? are all his suspicions completely lulled? I hope so. But you shall reassure me on this point when we meet. Pray, therefore, give me an early appointment, either at Lady L——'s or at Mrs. G——'s.

"Yours ever sincerely and affectionately,
"THOMAS EMMERSON."

"Heavens!" ejaculated Editha, pale and trembling with alarm: "if the Earl has really perused this letter——if he has actually opened it——"

"There can be no doubt of it, my lady," interrupted Gertrude; "and therefore let us consider it granted that he has opened it. But as a proof of your intimacy with Mr. Emmerson, it is fortunately in your ladyship's hands and not in your husband's."

"True!" observed Editha: then tossing the letter into the fire, she said, "Thus perish the proof. And now for Sackville's communication."

With these words, Editha opened the second letter, the contents of which were couched in the ensuing terms:—

"*Carlton House, December* 11.

"Language has no power to express the elysian bliss—the celestial happiness—that I experienced, beloved Editha, in your company last night. Methought you never looked so beautiful! It was rapture to gaze upon you: the pressure of your hand sent an electric flood of ecstacy thrilling through me. Your glorious eyes poured their ardour into the depths of my soul; and your smiles—Oh! it was an ineffable bliss to behold them—or rather to *feel* them beaming upon me. My wife is handsome—grandly handsome—every body will admit: but ten thousand times, my beloved Editha, do I prefer your oriental style of loveliness! It was the happiest moment of my life when for the first time, the other night at my aunt's Miss Bathurst's house, you looked back the language of love in return for the avowal of passion which I was daring and adventurous enough to make. But last night, as I have declared above, rendered me supremely happy. I sate next to you at the dinner-table—I kept by your side in the Green Room—again I sate next to you at supper—and every time we seized the opportunity to press each other's hands I felt immersed in a fount of rapture. Your husband could surmise nothing, because we were so circumspect; and as for my wife, she has no jealousy. Nothing, therefore, need mar the progress of our love. Though secret, it shall not be the less fervid: though veiled and hidden, it shall not be the less impassioned and enthusiastic. You gave me permission to write to you—to commit my thoughts and my desires to paper—and I hasten to avail myself of that permission. This I do, not only for the pleasure of thus communing as it were with you, but likewise because I have bethought myself of an opportunity for us to meet to night again, and indulge in unrestrained discourse. Strange that I did not last night recollect that Lady Wenlock's long-announced masked ball was so near at hand! Of course you have received an invitation? All the world of fashion will be there. Shall we not, then, avail ourselves of that golden opportunity for meeting—conversing—and perhaps passing two or three hours in each other's company?

"I know, my dear Editha, that you will at once yield an affirmative to all I have just asked. I therefore take it for granted that you will be at Lady Wenlock's to-night. I will be there punctually at nine o'clock. My costume shall be that of a Cavalier of the olden time, with doublet, huskins, cap, and every article of apparel in the most approved style. Ringlets of false hair will flow upon my shoulders; and as a matter of course I shall wear a mask. Do you think you will recognise me in this costume? You can scarcely fail to do so. But as I shall not know how you may be dressed, the usual etiquette must be reversed, and *you* will have to accost and single out *me* from the midst of the throng. Your watchword shall be—'*How comes it, Cavalier, that you have left your sword behind you?*'—and if the reply be, '*Because I expected the companionship of a gentle lady,*' then shall you know that it is really I—your adoring admirer—to whom you will be speaking. Farewell, then, until nine to-night!

"Your fond and devoted,
"SACKVILLE."

"A beautiful composition! quite a love of a love-letter! the sweetest of the sweet!" exclaimed Ger-

trude, with a sincere and most unfeigned admiration of the rhapsody.

"Yes—and a pleasant letter for a husband to have read," said Editha curtly. "But, thank heaven! he has allowed it to reach my hands, and has not kept it as a proof against me. Now, Gertrude, let us consult what is to be done. Do you think that the Earl means to inveigle me into some snare? Would he have allowed this letter to reach me if he did not purpose to make some use of its contents in order to ruin me?"

"Depend upon it, my lady," rejoined Gertrude, "that the Earl will devise some means—perhaps forge a letter, as if coming from you—to prevent Lord Sackville from personating the character of a Cavalier at all; but the Earl himself will go disguised as a Cavalier, so as to personate Lord Sackville—inveigle you into avowals and confessions of love—and then unmask himself to overwhelm you with confusion."

"Your surmises are admirable, Gertrude," said Editha. "There can be no doubt that you have hit exactly upon the expedient to which my cunning and crafty husband purposes to have recourse. But we will outwit him! Ah! I have it," she ejaculated, as a thought struck her. "Capital! capital! we will turn the tables completely upon the Earl. Talk of forgeries! I will see if I cannot forge a note from *him* to *a certain person*. Give me my desk, Gertrude."

The writing-materials being placed upon the table, the Countess proceeded to pen a letter which she indited with great care, disguising her own hand to the utmost of her power, and imitating that of her husband with great effect: for be it remembered that this was not the first time she had practised a little in this way. When that letter was finished, she hastened to pen another: but this latter was in her own undisguised handwriting, inasmuch as it was addressed to Lord Sackville, and ran as follows:—

"*Curzon House, Dec.* 11, *3 p.m.*

"Thanks for your letter, my dear Horace. I will be at Lady Wenlock's to-night. But on no account go dressed in the way you have described in your letter. Adopt some plain and unassuming garb; and *at half past eight o'clock* be in the conservatory opening from Lady Wenlock's drawing-room. You know it? I shall be there; and shall bring Gertrude with me as a companion—because the circumstances are peculiar, as I will explain. You may recognise me by my dress, an accurate description of which I now give you.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

"Yours affectionately,

"EDITHA."

Where the stars appear in Lady Curzon's letter, was given the description of the costume, but which there is no necessity to inflict upon our readers. Suffice it to say that the two letters being duly addressed and sealed,—the one in the feigned hand *to a certain person*, and the other in Editha's usual hand to *Lord Sackville*—Gertrude undertook to deliver them in person, so as to prevent the possibility of mistakes—and she sallied forth accordingly.

As for Emmerson's letter and the important matter to which he had alluded therein, Editha was compelled to postpone any notice of the same until the morrow, she having quite enough on her hands to occupy herself for the rest of the eventful day of which we are writing.

CHAPTER CXVIII.

THE MASKED BALL.

The reader will recollect that in the early part of this narrative we introduced him to the residence of Lady Wenlock in the neighbourhood of Kew. On that occasion this kind-hearted, hospitable, and wealthy widow gave an autumnal fête at her mansion, which stood in the midst of spacious pleasure grounds; and it was there that the memorable scene took place between Venetia and Colonel Malpas. But some months had elapsed since then; and the hand of winter was now upon the scene. True was it that the shrubberies formed of evergreens, resisted the frost, the ice-chill, and the snow of the borean season, and presented their long patches of verdure to the eye. But the shady avenues of summer were now naught save a bleak net-work of skeleton boughs; and the delicious arbours of roses, jessamine, and clematis had lost their verdure and their floral embellishments, and were shrivelled to a scant interlacement of bare tendrils.

But if nature were cold and cheerless without, all was brilliancy and warmth within the vast and gilded saloons of Lady Wenlock's mansion. By eight o'clock the almost countless carriages had set down a numerous and gay company—lords and titled dames, gentlemen and ladies—old and young—many clad in fancy costumes, and still more wearing masks. The effect was dazzling in the extreme,—the dresses exhibiting all the variations of elegance, gorgeousness, and magnificence, and making the saloons resemble parterres of flowers with their infinite minglings and blendings of hue and their illimitable diversification of gaudy splendours.

But we do not intend to dwell upon the description of a scene which our readers can doubtless picture for themselves. We will therefore simply observe that the utmost gaiety and good humour seemed to prevail—the masks fulfilled their assumed characters to general satisfaction—the splendid band that was in attendance poured forth its glorious strains through the saloons which were flooded with lustre—rich perfumes loaded the air—and in the apartments where dancing took place, this amusement was sustained with a more than ordinary spirit.

It was about half-past eight o'clock when two elegantly-dressed females, wearing masks upon their countenances, entered the conservatory which opened from the drawing-room. These were Editha and Gertrude. The reader may think it strange that a high-born Countess should take her obscure abigail with her to such a scene: but be it remembered in the first place that Editha was very fond of Gertrude—In the second place that Gertrude was deeply interested in certain proceedings then going on, and most anxious to witness their results—and thirdly that Gertrude possessed a shape of perfect symmetry and was altogether a very genteel and indeed superior girl, so that when elegantly dressed, with gloved hands and her mischievous lady's-maid-looking face more than half concealed by a black mask, she had every appearance of one quite in her place and feeling perfectly at home amidst the brilliant throng at Lady Wenlock's house.

There was nobody else in the conservatory at the moment when Editha and Gertrude entered it. The atmosphere was warm, and perfumed with the fragrance of hot-house flowers. Orange trees, limes, and several plants from the tropics spread their bright foliage and displayed their green or golden fruit, thus cheating the imagination with the belief that summer reigned within those walls of glass, though winter was chill, and hoar, and icy without.

"How well we managed to issue forth from the mansion without being observed by the Earl," said Editha to Gertrude.

"Yes, my lady," was the response. "His lordship had not left when we came away; but I have no doubt he means to come. Indeed, I am certain that by the frequent goings and comings of his confidential valet all the afternoon, preparations were being made for his lordship to appear to-night in a fancy costume——"

"Oh! if our stratagem should succeed thoroughly," whispered Editha, "how amusing, how exquisite it will be! By the bye, when we left the house just now and entered the carriage, even if the Earl were peeping, he could not have seen how we were dressed, as we were both enveloped in those great thick cloaks and had the black veils thrown over our heads."

"Must he not have wondered," asked Gertrude, "supposing that he *did* see us go out, who on earth your ladyship was taking with you? Or do you suppose he would suspect that your companion was none other than myself?"

"No," responded Editha. "If he saw us at all and thought anything upon the subject, he would suppose that I had invited some female friend of mine to accompany me. But hush! hither comes a masque exactly of Lord Sackville's height, symmetry, and gait."

As the Countess spoke these words, a gentleman wearing a mask entered the conservatory; and instantaneously accosting Editha, he whispered, "Dearest lady, I recognise you by your costume:" and slightly raising his mask, he disclosed the features of Lord Sackville.

"Let us step aside, Horace, for a moment," said Editha: and taking his arm, she continued to observe in a low and tender tone, "I am delighted to meet you again."

"And I, Editha—what must be my feelings?" murmured Sackville, who was over head and ears in love with the beauteous but profligate patrician lady: and through the holes in their masks their eyes flashed mingled love, tenderness, and desire.

They had passed farther into the conservatory, accompanied by Gertrude, who walked by the side of her mistress; and when reaching the corner most remote from the drawing-room door, they stood for a few minutes to converse in rapid whispers.

"Tell me all that has transpired," said Lord Sackville; "and to what circumstances you alluded in your note. For about the same time it arrived, did I receive *another* intimation warning me as to this night's costume: but though indirectly intended to excite my fears, it nevertheless only stirred up my curiosity."

"I have every reason to believe," answered Editha, quickly, "that the Earl intercepted your letter—read it—re-sealed it—and then allowed it to reach my hands, just as if it had never been tampered with at all. Therefore, believing that the Earl had thus become aware of the appointment which you gave me for to-night, and that he would assume *your* character in order to ensnare me——"

"Ah! then this explains the mysterious billet which I received:" and as Lord Sackville uttered these words, he drew forth a note which he handed to Editha, who hastily scanned its contents, Gertrude peeping over her shoulder.

It ran as follows:—

"Take warning! You propose to be at the Masked Ball to-night at Lady Wenlock's: but a plot to assassinate you is on foot; and therefore prudence suggests that you should remain away, or at all events adopt some costume quite different from that which you originally proposed to wear.

"A FRIEND."

"Yes—'tis clear enough," whispered Gertrude to her mistress, in an exulting tone: "the Earl's object was to keep his lordship"—alluding to Lord Sackville—"away from here this night. But the Earl is signally defeated already—and will be completely humbled!"

"Yes—provided the *other person* comes," added Editha: and she then explained to Lord Sackville the stratagem she had devised to expose her husband and turn the tables completely upon him. "And now," she added, when the hurried details were over, "let us return amongst the masked throng and ascertain whether the delectable Earl has as yet made his appearance."

In the meantime the Earl of Curzon *had* arrived at the mansion, apparelled in the fancy costume of a Cavalier of the olden time. He wore a doublet—buskins—a cap of a Greek shape—and a belt: and he had not omitted the long hair hanging down upon his shoulders. The reader need scarcely be informed that it was *his* hand which had penned the fictitious warning to Lord Sackville, whom he had indeed come thither to personate in the hope of meeting his wife and drawing her into such a conversation as would place her completely in his power.

On entering the brilliantly-lighted saloons, he mingled amongst the throng of masques, in the anxious expectation of being accosted by Editha, but still wondering somewhat whether she would be there at all.

"It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that Sackville had my anonymous note," thought the Earl within himself; "and since then the interval has been too short for him to convey an intimation to Editha either that he will not be here to-night or that he will come in some other garb than that indicated in his letter. I have watched all the comings-in and goings-out at home in Grosvenor Street this afternoon and evening; and no more letters have arrived—no lacquey from Carlton House has called with either note or message. 'Tis true that the minx Gertrude went out in the afternoon almost immediately after Editha received the two letters; but it could not have been to make any fresh arrangement with Lord Sackville, because he himself only received my warning at about the same time and could not therefore in any way have communicated a change of plan to Editha. That all goes well, then, I may suppose. Besides, Editha and her precious maid went out

together ere now in the carriage, both cloaked and veiled. Doubtless my wife has brought her abigail with her to see the beauties and mingle in the intrigues of a masked ball! But if so, what an insult to Lady Wenlock and all these noble ladies, to introduce an obscure serving-wench hither! 'Tis clear, even if I entertained any doubt before, that Editha is entirely in Gertrude's power; and she propitiates the artful girl by bringing her to such a scene as this. Oh! it is high time that the progress of such intrigues should be stopped!"

Such were the musings of the Earl of Curzon during the first quarter of an hour that he sauntered through the saloons of Lady Wenlock's mansion. Every now and then his eyes were fixed upon some beauteous form whose symmetry resembled that of his wife; and then he scrutinisingly looked to ascertain if the hair of the masked lady possessed that same rich gloss and purply hue which characterised the tresses of Editha: but even when he felt most assured that he recognised his wife in some exquisitely-dressed masque who passed him by, he soon found that he was mistaken, as none of all these accosted him with the watchwords pointed out in Sackville's letter.

He passed into the dancing-rooms—he proceeded along the brilliantly-lighted passages—he lounged on the superbly-decorated landings—and still no lady accosted him. Half-an-hour had now elapsed, and he began to think that his plot had failed and that Editha would not come. In the depths of his soul he breathed as it were imprecations of annoyance and disappointment, and once more did he retrace his way to the principal drawing-room, where the throng of masques was thickest. Scarcely had he entered this magnificent saloon, when a hand was laid gently upon his arm; and stopping short he found himself accosted by a lady, elegantly dressed in ball costume, but with her countenance concealed by a thick veil instead of a mask. Glossy ringlets of purply blackness peeped forth from beneath the thick folds of the veil; and as much as the eye could observe of the bare shoulders and arms, seemed of that same rich olive-tinted complexion which characterised the warm and impassioned Editha. That it was his own wife who now accosted him, the Earl of Curzon felt convinced at the very first glance; and a thrill of almost diabolic exultation penetrated to his heart as the pass-words were whisperingly murmured in his ears.

"*Cavalier*," said the veiled one, "*how is it that you have left your sword behind you?*"

"*Because*," was Curzon's prompt reply—and he also spoke whisperingly, so that there might be the less chance of the voice being recognised as his own instead of Lord Sackville's; "*because I expected to meet a gentle lady here to-night;* and that this expectation is now fulfilled, I have reason to congratulate myself."

Thus speaking he took the veiled lady's hand, pressed it tenderly, and then drew it within his arm—not having the slightest doubt but that it was Editha who had thus become his companion, and towards whom he was practising so much deeply-planned dissimulation.

"How charming did you seem last night," he continued to whisper, in that low murmuring tone which suits as it were any male voice when giving utterance to the insidious language of sensuous passion. "It was happiness ineffable to be seated near you—to be permitted to gaze with ill-concealed admiration upon your charms—to catch the sunlight of your smiles and the beams of glory that flashed from your lustrous eyes——"

"Oh!" my lord," responded the veiled one, likewise in a low tremulous whisper, "you are overwhelming me with compliments and flatteries!"

"Flatteries!" repeated Curzon, totally unable to distinguish in the voice of his companion any peculiarity of accent to show that it was not the voice of Editha: "in the first place I never flatter—and in the second place, even if I did, it would be impossible to adopt such a course with you. Because no language could be too exaggerated to express the power of your charms—those charms which have made me your slave!"

"But surely, surely," murmured the lady, "you cannot have conceived for me a passion so fervid—so intense——"

"Tell me, dearest, dearest lady," whispered Curzon, as he slowly led his veiled companion amidst the maze of the masked throng,—"tell me whether it be the first time that any one has ventured to address you in this language since you were first wooed by him who gained possession of your hand?"

"Oh!" would you believe me, my lord," answered the lady, in the soft tremulous tone which beauty adopts when bashfully confessing the homage that it receives; "would you believe me, my lord, if I were to declare that such language has never been addressed to me before?"

"No, dearest lady," answered Curzon; "I assuredly should doubt your sincerity — because, lovely as you are, brilliant and fascinating as you are, it would be impossible that you could have escaped the thousand adulations—the myriad flatteries—yes, and the innumerable proofs of devotion and love—which constitute the triumph of all the stars that shine in the galaxy of beauty. But, Oh! think me not too venturous, dear lady, if I ask whether any of those adulations have made an impression on your heart—whether, in a word, you have ever had a lover besides your husband?"

"I never loved but two persons," said the veiled one, murmuringly. "My husband was one——"

"And the other?" said Curzon inquiringly, and speaking with the 'bated breath of an assumed suspense: for of course he was personating *Lord Sackville* towards one whom he believed to be *Editha*.

"That other?" responded the lady: then after a few moments' hesitation, she whispered, "That other—is yourself!"

"Oh! if I could be assured of this, how happy—how supremely happy should I feel!" said Curzon: but in the depths of his soul he silently exclaimed, "Vile, perfidious Editha!"

"Do you not believe me, then?—do you suppose that I am telling you an untruth?" and as the veiled lady thus spoke, she pressed the Earl's arm with a kind of convincing tenderness. "If I did not love you, I should take your very mistrust of me as an insult."

"Insult! No—heaven is my witness that I could not possibly insult you!"—and Curzon affected an exceeding fervour of tone, although still speaking low and murmuringly.

"And yet the words you uttered ere now would almost have implied the belief," rejoined the veiled lady, "that there has been levity in my conduct—that I have given the world reason to speak lightly of me: whereas I solemnly declare that never, never was I faithless to my duties as a wife—never, never have I lost sight of the self-respect belonging to my position in society. That is to say," she added, in a scarcely audible tone of tender tremulousness, "until I last night received from you those attentions which made so deep an impression upon my soul!"

"Pardon me, dear lady," said the Earl, "if I continue the discourse for a few moments upon this topic. But as you have given me your love, I wish to be assured that it is a love in which only one other—and that *other* your husband—has ever shared."

"It is so—it is so," said the veiled one: "solemnly do I declare it! What possible reason can you have for supposing the contrary? Has the world ever dared to make free with my name?—has the breath of scandal ever been raised against me? If so, tell me—that I may justify myself, or explain away any circumstance to which in some unguarded moment my conduct may have imparted an air of levity."

"And you will not be angry with me if I tell you what the world says?" whispered Curzon, earnestly.

"I will not—I will not," was the soft and musical response. "Tell me—what says the world of me?"

"In the first place, dear lady," proceeded Curzon, "it has coupled the name of Colonel Malpas with yours——"

"Colonel Malpas!" said the veiled one, with a sudden start which made Curzon feel more than ever convinced that all his suspicions in that quarter were really true, and that Malpas had been his wife's paramour.

"Yes," he said: "the world declares that the Colonel has been your lover."

"Then the world is guilty of the foulest calumny," returned the veiled lady: "for I do not even know Colonel Malpas to speak to."

"Not know him?" ejaculated the Earl, inwardly cursing what he supposed to be Editha's astounding effrontery: but instantly mastering his excitement, he said, "Then the world has indeed done you much wrong: and perhaps it was equally guilty of as foul a calumny, when it whispered abroad that you had formed a new intimacy—with a certain stock-broker, money-lender, or whatever he is—of the name of Emmerson."

"My lord, you must positively be dreaming," said the veiled lady, partially withdrawing her hand from Curzon's arm. "But I cannot believe that you are intending a premeditated insult, to which however the bare iteration of such a calumny almost amounts, when I affirm—solemnly, sacredly affirm—that I never even heard of the name of Emmerson in my life!"

"Then again has the world wronged you most cruelly," said Curzon. "But enough upon this topic. Tell me, sweet lady—did your husband notice my attentions to you last night?"

An ejaculation of dismay burst from the lips of the veiled lady as this question fell upon her ears.

But we must pause for a moment to observe that while the preceding dialogue was taking place, Curzon and his companion had issued from the drawing-room and come forth upon the landing, where they had paused to pursue their discourse: they had then slowly and loungingly descended the great marble staircase, at the foot of which the lady stopped suddenly short, and disengaged herself from Curzon's arm as he put that question which we have last recorded.

"Wretched woman!" he instantaneously said; "you begin to suspect now that something is wrong and that I am not really he whom I have pretended to be! You fancied that you were conversing with *another*—with Lord Sackville? But behold!"—and the Earl of Curzon took off the mask from his face.

By a sudden and impulsive movement, his companion threw back her veil in startled dismay, and disclosed to the astounded Earl of Curzon the features of Lady Prescott!

"Perdition! there is some mistake!" he said, grasping her by the arm. "But for heaven's sake compose yourself," he added, perceiving the mingled astonishment and terror into which his strange conduct had thrown her.

There were very few masques in the hall at this moment; but amongst these few were *three* in particular—two females and a gentleman—who from a little distance witnessed the scene which we have just described. To the eyes of ordinary observers there was nothing particularly remarkable in it—the withdrawing of a mask and veil, and a mutual recognition in consequence, being a common occurrence on such occasions; while the strong emotions that accompanied this special recognition were so transitory and so speedily subdued, that they might easily have been mistaken for the mere expression of surprise without any more powerful or vexatious feeling. But the three masques to whom we have particularly alluded as witnesses of this scene, not only watched it attentively, but likewise penetrated the full depth of its meaning. The reader will have no difficulty in understanding that these were Editha, Gertrude, and Lord Sackville; and the moment the scene itself took place, Editha, separating from the nobleman and her maid, glided up to the spot where her husband and Lady Prescott were standing transfixed, gazing upon each other. Then taking off her mask, Editha suddenly disclosed her countenance to their view.

"Heavens! your wife, my lord!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, now seized with an overwhelming confusion.

"Yes—'tis I—this false man's wife," said Editha, in a tone which though low and rapid, was terrible with the accentuation of a bitter malignity. "I have heard and seen enough to understand the intimacy which has sprung up between you. I was close behind you both when first you met ere now. I heard *you*, my lord, lavish your poetic eloquence upon this woman: and I heard *you*," she added, bending the lightnings of her eyes upon the almost fainting and utterly bewildered Lady Prescott, "confess that you loved him in return. Oh! it is a joy—it is a pleasure—a perfect paradise of revengeful feeling, to unmask a vile traitorous husband such as *you*—and a base intriguing courtezan such as *you!*"

And having thus poured forth the bitterness of her invectives and the lightning of her looks upon the Earl and Lady Prescott, Editha resumed her mask—glided up the staircase—and plunged into the saloons, where she was shortly after joined by Sackville and Gertrude, to whom she recounted all she had said to her husband and Lady Prescott.

Almost immediately afterwards, Editha and Gertrude took their departure, exulting in the success of the stratagem which had thus led to such a merciless exposure of the Earl of Curzon: and Horace himself did not remain much longer amidst the festive scene, but ordered his own carriage and returned to Carlton House. But was he contented at having met the Countess of Curzon there that night? Assuredly so; because she had given him the fondest assurances that at the earliest opportunity his hopes should be gratified and that she would abandon herself to him!

Oh! these scenes of patrician depravity and aristocratic profligacy! Wherefore do we continue to pen them? Because they are faithful reflections, in the mirror of our narrative, of the vices, immoralities, and crimes of that arrogant, heartless, and unprincipled class!

CHAPTER CXIX.

THE FORGED LETTER.

THE whole scene which took place at the foot of the staircase, as just described, scarcely occupied a couple of minutes, even including the little episode which the sudden appearance of Editha introduced into the drama. While she was pouring forth her bitter invectives and bending the lightnings of her looks upon her husband and Lady Prescott, these two were rendered utterly speechless by the abruptness and also by the nature of the scene. The Earl saw in a moment that he was the dupe of a new stratagem on the part of his wife, and that when he assumed the character of the Cavalier so as to personate Lord Sackville, she by some means discovered his intent and had turned the tables upon him. Thus was it that through mingled astonishment and mortification, he lost all his presence of mind, and remained with paralysed faculties, like a guilty man in the presence of a wife who seemed suddenly to acquire the right of performing the part of an outraged woman!

As for Lady Prescott—*she* had all along believed that she was to meet Lord Curzon, and that he would be in the dress of a Cavalier. The conversation between them had taken a turn which she certainly thought extraordinary; and the reader has seen how strong were her feelings when accused of intriguing with Colonel Malpas, whom she only knew by sight, and with Mr. Emmerson, whom she had never seen in her life! But when the Earl had put to her the question concerning her husband—that husband who had been dead for two years—it naturally struck the lady that there was either some fearful mistake, or else that she was being made the victim of a wanton insult. Then, as the Earl revealed his countenance, she of course was not surprised to behold the features of this noblemen, because it was precisely he whom she had come thither on purpose to meet—in whose behalf she had really been stricken with a passionate sentiment—and to whom she had freely and intentionally made an avowal of love. Conceive, then, her terror and dismay when on raising her veil and revealing her own face, she saw in a moment, by *his* astonishment, that it was not she herself but *another* whom the Earl had come thither to meet; and then, before she was able to regain her composure, up stepped Editha, whom she immediately recognised, to overwhelm her with reproaches! Insulting, cutting, goading as the language was which the Countess of Curzon had addressed to her, how could she possibly feel otherwise than that she deserved it all? No wonder, then, that she cowered beneath the fiery glance and writhed under the torture of the lashing words which Editha poured upon her: no wonder that she was unable to give any reply or attempt a syllable either of bold denial or self-exculpation, in respect to the charges made against her by the indignant Countess!

We have paused to chronicle these few explanations in order to fill up any blanks with regard to emotions or incidents that may have occurred in the hasty outline which we sketched of the scene at the foot of the staircase. We now take up the thread of the narrative at the moment when Editha, speeding away from the presence of her husband and Lady Prescott, left them stupified with what had just occurred, and overwhelmed with confusion. The Earl was the first to regain his composure; and putting on his mask, he said in a quick tone of excitement, "Resume your veil, dear lady—and let us seek some nook where we can converse together. I will give you the fullest explanations."

Lady Prescott drew down the veil over her countenance, upon the brunette complexion of which sate a deadly pallor: and as she again took the Earl's arm, he could feel the glowing volume of her bosom swelling and sinking with tumultuous heavings, like the waves of the sea. After she had drawn down the veil, she cast a terrified look around, as if fearful lest the Countess of Curzon should reappear and commence another scene; but her courage, and therewith her composure, began to revive, when on glancing upon the three or four groups of masks scattered through the spacious hall, she saw by their manner that they had not taken any particular notice of the scene which had just occurred.

The Earl led her again up the staircase, into the drawing-room; and thence they passed into the conservatory, where they found themselves alone.

"Good heavens!" said Lady Prescott, in a voice full of that anguish to which she was now enabled to give free vent: "what a fatal occurrence! Wretched woman that I am! my disgrace will tomorrow be bruited throughout London! How seriously I am compromised with you!——But, Curzon," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting the course of her own ideas, "explain all this! Wherefore write so urgent a letter enjoining me to be here, and then seem surprised that 'tis I whom you have met——"

"My dear creature," interrupted the Earl of Curzon, "I ere now told you that I would give the fullest explanations. Know, then, that I this day intercepted a letter from Lord Sackville to my wife, giving her an appointment at this mansion and specifying not only the dress he would wear but also the pass-words to be used on the occasion. That dress was the costume of a Cavalier: those pass-words are the ones which you and I this night exchanged. You can now understand wherefore I am here disguised in this costume to-night, and whom I really expected to meet."

"Ah! then the letter I have received is a forgery?" ejaculated Lady Prescott: "a vile base forgery? O heavens! how am I covered with ridicule in your eyes! and how shall I be disgraced in the eyes of the world! I am ruined—I am undone: my reputation is gone! The Queen will hear of it, and banish me from Court——"

"Compose yourself," said Curzon, who experienced some sort of regard, though chiefly based upon sensual passion, for the handsome widow. "All may not turn out so bad as you now apprehend. We will talk upon that subject directly. But tell me—have you that letter about you——"

"Ah! yes—'tis here," responded lady Prescott, in a tone indicative of a most mournful sense of humiliation: and thrusting her hand into her bosom, she murmured, "I have the letter—but I dare not show it to you!"

Her voice was scarcely audible, influenced as it was by her emotions of mingled anguish and shame, and stifled too as the accents were by the thick veil through which they had to penetrate: for be it observed that it was in consequence of her voice being thus subdued by the folds of this veil, that the Earl had ere now (previously to the scene on the staircase) listened to it so long without perceiving that it was *not* the voice of his Countess.

"Yes—you must let me see that note," said the Earl, taking her hands and pressing them in his own. "There can now be no secrets between us: we have gone too far to retract. The occurrences of this night have suddenly established between us the intimacy which half-a-dozen years could scarcely have created under other circumstances. Were this not the case, think you that I would have revealed to your ears the fact that my wife is an intrigante—an accomplished Intrigante—an intrigante the strength of whose passions is only equal by her artifice in ministering to them! To confess myself a cuckold—to avow my knowledge of my own dishonour—to admit that I am duped and deceived, without being able to obtain a single proof against my abandoned wife—all this is painful and humiliating enough for me. Need you then, on your part, hesitate to show me that letter?"

"Ah! when it contains avowals and protestations made in your name," said the lady whose voice was still low and tremulous, "which you will perhaps refuse to confirm and sanction?"

"If the letter tells you that you are beautiful and assures you that your charms are great," cried Curzon, "the forger of that letter has only said for me what I am fully prepared to say in my own behalf. Yes—you are handsome—gloriously handsome: and I love you—I love you!"

Thus speaking, the Earl—having assured himself by means of a rapid glance swept around the conservatory that no observer was nigh—caught Lady Prescott in his arms, tore away the veil from her face, and glued his lips to hers. All the sensual passions of the widow flamed up in a moment; and abandoning herself to the full tide of ecstacy which thrilled through her frame, she vibrated in his arms, supple and elastic as a wanton Bayadare craving other joys more replete with frenetic pleasure than even the foretasting raptures of this kiss! Then, as the Earl, profiting by the occasion to indulge in amorous dalliance, gently invaded with his hand the treasures of the amorous widow's glowing bust, he was enabled to help himself to the note which she had hesitated to give him. Drawing it forth from the elysian temple which had been made its receptacle, and while she herself, blushing and trembling—panting and palpitating, sank upon a seat to adjust her hair and resume her veil, the Earl ran his eyes over the contents of the letter:—

"Pardon me, dearest lady, for venturing to address you in such terms as these which I am about to adopt; but the good feeling that sprang up between us last evening at Carlton House—the tender nature of the discourse which we held together—and the manner in which you received the little demonstrations of love which the opportunity permitted me to make, all have emboldened me to repeat the avowal of my feelings, in far more explicit terms. Although I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance for some few years past, and although I have ever regarded you as one of the handsomest and most accomplished ladies of the day, it was nevertheless reserved until last night for your wit and beauty to assert a sudden but irresistible empire over my heart. This is the truth—the solemn truth; and I implore you to believe me when I declare that last night the influence of your loveliness, your fascinations, and your graces, filled my soul with a boundless admiration. I was smitten with a deathless sentiment. Oh! do not reject my prayer because in the cold formal routine of the world's circumstances I am already married; do not scorn me because my hand is given to another—for my heart was mine own to bestow until last night; and now it is no longer mine—it is yours!

"The prayer that I am about to offer up is that you will grant me a meeting this night, so that I may explain my feelings more fully. The opportunity for such an interview is ready at hand. Lady Wenlock gives a masked ball to which of course you have received an invitation. May I entreat you to be there to-night soon after nine o'clock? I shall be dressed as a Cavalier, with a small cap of the archer-fashion, long ringlets, a velvet doublet, red belt, and yellow buskins. Of course I shall be masked. Be you there—masked or veiled, so that no one may recognize you. That you may incur no danger of compromising yourself by any error or mistake, I propose that you accost me with some such question as the following:—'*Wherefore, brave cavalier, hast thou left thy sword behind thee?*'—then if the response be, '*Because I expected to meet a gentle lady,*' you will know that you have accosted the right individual, and that 'tis I—your sincere admirer—who will thus have given that answer. Do not fail me then, dearest lady:—for I love you most sincerely—most earnestly—and most devotedly; and I would give ten years of my life to possess your love in return. I have a thousand things to say; but must postpone them till to-night.

"Your affectionate

"CURZON."

The reader will of course understand that this was the letter which the Countess of Curzon had written in a hand simulating that of her husband, and which we said at the time was addressed to *a certain person*. This letter had been delivered by Gertrude at Lady Prescott's town residence; and believing that it really came from the Earl himself, she had fallen into the snare so artfully set by the cunning and unprincipled Editha.

"'Tis my wife who has done this," said Curzon: then with a concentrated bitterness of look and accent, he observed, "She has completely turned the tables upon me!"

"And will she not make all London ring with the story?" asked poor Lady Prescott, with a deep sob.

"It would be wrong, very wrong," said the Earl,

"were I to attempt to buoy you up with a contrary hope. But if you love me, why not dare all—every thing—and become my mistress openly? Were you not already prepared," he inquired, tenderly pressing her in his arms, "to gratify my fondest hopes?"

"Yes," she answered in a murmuring tone; "but then our amour would have been secret—my reputation would have continued untainted—and if an eligible offer of marriage had presented itself, I might have accepted it."

"True, said the Earl, still straining her in his arms: "but circumstances, you perceive have proved hostile to us, and we must now make the best of them."

"But can you not enter into some arrangement with your wife?" asked Lady Prescott: "can you not agree upon mutual forgiveness, so that if you overlook *her* faults she will wink at *your* infidelities—the result being that she will keep secret the incidents of this night?"

"Matters have become too serious between her and me," said Lord Curzon, "to admit of a compromise:"—and still he strained the handsome widow in his arms, once more drawing aside the veil from her countenance and covering her lips and cheeks with kisses.

"But my situation in the royal household," she murmured.

"You are not dependant upon it."

"No—I am rich: but then the honour——"

"Ah! some sacrifices must be at times made to love," whispered the Earl, in an endearing tone.

"Yes—I feel that it is so," murmured the amorous widow, in a voice that was languid and almost dying with sensual longings.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, the Earl of Curzon and Lady Prescott returned from Kew to London together in the same carriage; and the rest of that night they passed in each other's company, at Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of accommodation in Soho Square.

CHAPTER CXX.

THE PEARLS.

VENETIA was somewhat indisposed by the fatigues attendant on the private theatricals, the banquet, and the late hour at which she retired to rest; and she did not quit her chamber during the whole of the day the incidents of which we have detailed in the last few chapters. She gave orders to her faithful Jessica that she wished to be left perfectly tranquil, and not to be persecuted with visits, letters, or messages: and although invited to Lady Wenlock's masked ball, she was compelled to remain absent, so great was the sense of exhaustion which she experienced.

This was the first day that Venetia had passed alone for some time. The reader may be therefore well assured that she had a long communing with herself. She thought of many things—some agreeable some disagreeable—of gratified ambition on the one hand, and a career of dissipation on the other—of the exalted flight which she had taken up into the aristocratic heaven with a coronet upon her brow, and of the downward plunge which she had likewise made into the vortex of profligacy. But did she repent of the course which she had pursued? and in order to regain her virtue, would she abandon her haughty rank and descend from the pedestal to which the royal hand had raised her? No such thing! The time for such regret was passed; nor were there ever such holy lights burning in the sanctuary of her soul as would have served to irradiate a career of immaculate virtue. Within herself, as it were, did she possess the principles of her own moral ruin—the elements of degradation from pristine virtue and innocence. For she had passions to gratify and feelings to minister unto, which in themselves became incompatible with a virtuous career. Being originally so obscure and entertaining the ambition to rise so highly, how was it possible to attain that object without the sacrifice of virtue? Again, though she had exercised the moral courage as a matter of worldly calculation to remain virtuous until her marriage with Sackville, yet the moment that nuptial knot was tied and she had tasted the joys of love, all the desires that were inherent in her nature flamed up with volcanic ardour, and she became as it were a veritable Messalina in a few short months!

Venetia had a generous mind, a large intellectual capacity, a cool judgment, and a quick appreciation of everything that was tasteful, elegant, and refined; and yet her passions, when once the rein was given to them, threatened to plunge her into depravities the grossest and the vilest. How often has it been—alas, that we should be compelled to chronicle the fact!—that women of the strongest intelligence have proved themselves of the weakest morality; so that some who have wielded the sceptre of a mighty state and kept millions in awe, were unable to rule a little rebel passion or triumph over a single provocative desire!

During the current of Venetia's thoughts, there was a subject which intruded itself more than once. This was the fact that out of the *six* individuals who had originally laid the memorable wager concerning her, *four* had already revelled in her charms. She was the wife of one—the favourite mistress of another—had fallen into the arms of a third by sheer mistake—and had voluntarily abandoned herself as a paramour to the fourth. Thus Horace Sackville was her husband—the Prince Regent owned her as his favourite—the Earl of Curzon had passed a night in her arms through the mistake just alluded to—and Sir Douglas Huntingdon had been blessed by the joys of her spontaneous yielding. Of the six personages who had originally laid the memorable wager, the Marquis of Leveson and Colonel Malpas were the only two who had not possessed her; and these two she hated cordially. For the Marquis, made up as he was with all kinds of succedaneous materials, appeared in her eyes to be a loathsome monster of feculence and corruption; and Colonel Malpas was a detestable coward, a sneaking grovelling scoundrel, whose personal beauty could not for a single moment palliate those evil qualities which rendered him an abhorrence to a woman of Venetia's mind and spirit.

We have said that Venetia had chosen to pass the entire day alone. In the evening, as her husband was going to the masked ball, and would therefore not be home till late, she removed from their usual chamber into the elegant seclusion of her own boudoir: and retiring to bed early, she soon fell into a sound and refreshing sleep. Having passed through the wondrous mazes and fanciful intricacies of several pleasant dreams, a shadow appeared all on a sudden to fall upon the sunlight of her thoughts; and the pleasurable nature of her visions underwent a rapid change, plunging her into the horrors of a night-mare. At length she awoke with a start; and sitting up in bed, experienced an ineffable sensation of relief on finding herself in her own boudoir instead of the vile den where imagination had just been plunging her. Upon the night-table near the couch burnt a silver lamp of exquisite workmanship, and which was fed with a perfumed oil compounded expressly for the use of Carlton House: on the larger table which stood in the middle of the room, were several letters, together with an object which appeared to Venetia's eyes to be a jewel case.

"Jessica has placed upon that table all the missives which have arrived to-day," thought Venetia to herself: then consulting a watch which she took from beneath her pillow, she found that it was just midnight.

Only midnight! and she had slept so soundly that she felt fully awake, without the slightest inclination to slumber again. The idea struck her that she would at least ascertain what that jewel-case meant, even if she did not examine her correspondence. Stepping therefore from the couch—her naked feet and ankles tripping glancingly in the dazzling polish of their whiteness and firmness, upon the rich carpet—and with the drapery hanging so negligently about her form that all the richness and grandeur of its luxuriant but firm proportions were displayed—she approached the table, opened the jewel-case, and found that it contained a magnificent string of pearls of the largest size she had ever seen. But from whom did this gift come? If the Prince were the donor, he would have presented them with his own hand, as was his invariable custom. The pearls therefore assuredly came not from his Royal Highness. There was no note, nor card, nor any written intimation in-

side the box, nor fastened to it, to aid Venetia in her conjectures. Her curiosity was now piqued; for the pearls seemed to be of that costly nature which denoted some liberal and most probably wealthy donor; and she was naturally anxious to learn who the individual could be. At least thirty letters lay upon the table: doubtless amongst them would she find one clearing up the mystery! She therefore took all the letters, together with the case of pearls, in her hands; and tripped back to her couch.

But before she opened a single letter, Venetia could not resist the temptation of placing the string of pearls upon the rich masses of her auburn hair and then surveying herself in a little toilette hand-mirror which lay on the table close by. It was one of those involuntary acts of vanity of which even the most intellectual women are capable, and to which all beautiful females are impelled as it were by the very consciousness of beauty. Venetia saw that the pearls became her admirably; and that though her hair was negligently tied up, its shining luxuriance set off those ornaments to their utmost advantage. But a smile of sweet triumph played upon her coral lips as the thought struck her that it was her hair which set off the exquisite beauty of the pearls, rather than the pearls setting off the glossy glory of those silken masses!

But while that smile was still lingering upon her lips, revealing pearls as pure, as white, and as even as the string which now rested upon her head, the feeling of curiosity to ascertain who sent the gift sprang up with additional force; and flinging down the mirror, she began opening the letters one after another. Hastily glancing at the name of each writer, so as to form an idea of the contents, she disposed of the epistles and notes with a running commentary uttered audibly and in a musing tone.

"An invitation to the Duchess of Darlington's for next Monday evening. And how very courteously worded! '*Dearest Lady Sackville.*' I remember that when I was yet plain Venetia Trelawney, my carriage one day accidentally came in contact with that of the magnificent Duchess, through the carelessness of *her own coachman;* when she gave me a look which said as plainly as ever eyes yet spoke, '*I wonder who this creature is whose carriage comes within even a dozen yards of mine!*' And now she is ready to kiss the ground upon which I tread. Ah! here is a letter from Mrs. Fitzherbert, demanding more places and pensions for her relatives and friends. And here is a note from Miss Bathurst stating that as she could not see me to-day when she called, she has written to remind me that I must procure the vacant Bishopric for her cousin the Dean, and a baronetcy for his second brother the Admiral, and a pension for his other brother the great banker who has failed. Well," continued Venetia, with a sigh, "all this must be done: but really these people are insatiable! Day after day, nothing but places, pensions, sinecures, emoluments, and honours, for this cormorant horde of Fitzherberts, Bathursts, and all their relatives, to even the hundredth remove! But, ah! what says Miss Bathurst here in a postscript?—that Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot must positively be provided for immediately—that the mother is anxious to become Bedchamber Woman in the household of the Queen or Princess Charlotte—and that Penelope is resolved to be nothing less than a Maid of Honour. Well, again I say it must all be done! Here is another invitation—and another—and another—and another," continued Venetia, opening letter after letter and tossing them away as soon as glanced at. "Ah! what is this?"—and her countenance assumed a different look as she opened a letter signed by *Jocelyn Loftus.*

This was not a letter to be either disposed of with a satirical comment, or to be tossed aside to be perused at leisure. But it was a letter the contents of which seemed to be as serious as they were lengthy; for as Venetia continued the perusal her look became more solemn, until it deepened into sorrowfulness:—then on the lashes of each eye slowly glimmered forth a tear—and presently those crystal drops rolled down the lady's cheeks, shining in their pearly path like twin drops of dew.

Presently a profound sob rose slowly from Venetia's bosom, which it convulsed with a great heaving; and then as she listlessly held the letter in her hand, when its perusal was ended, she murmured to herself, "Perhaps it is better *thus,* after all!"

But, Oh! it was now a mockery—a painful mockery—for Venetia, humbled, sorrowful, and tearful as she was, to retain those dazzling pearls upon her brow. But, heavens! the pearls were as completely forgotten at this moment as if there were no such things in the world; and there she sate, on her elegant couch, with the ornaments on her hair and the tears in her eyes—a touching monument of the moral that the symbols of triumph and of sorrow, of worldly pride and of heartfelt pain are singularly united in the destiny of mortals.

At length, slowly awakening from that painful reverie, Venetia folded up the letter which had produced such a change in her mood, and carefully deposited it under her pillow. Then, as her eyes fell upon the jewel-case, the gift of the pearls was suddenly recalled to her memory: and snatching them from her head, she flung them with a sort of frenzied impetuosity across the room, exclaiming, "Begone! in this moment of my deep humiliation, thou seemest a mockery and a reproach!"

She then slowly reclined her head upon her pillow; and gave way to the train of thoughts which the letter from Jocelyn Loftus had conjured up. Sleep gradually stole upon her eyes; and her sorrowful feelings, whatever their nature might have been, were soon steeped in oblivion.

At nine o'clock on the following morning Jessica softly and slowly stole into the room. Her mistress was still sleeping—the cheeks gently flushed as if with the soft excitement of some vision—her head resting upon one naked arm plump to the eye and brilliant in its alabaster fairness—while the lips, slightly apart, revealed the pearls within that mouth which seemed formed only to breathe the most fragrant sweets or to receive the delicious kisses of love. Stealthily, for fear of awakening her, was Jessica about to retire from the boudoir so as to allow her mistress to sleep on, when she suddenly beheld the string of pearls lying upon the carpet. She stooped down and picked them up; and while

she was contemplating them with admiration, Venetia awoke.

"What a splendid gift, my lady," exclaimed the abigail. "Might I inquire from whom it comes?"

"I know not," answered Venetia. "Was there any letter accompanying the jewel-case that contained the pearls?"

"To be sure, my lady," returned Jessica. "The hall-porter gave both the case and the letter to me last night, and I brought them into the boudoir along with all the other correspondence which had arrived for your ladyship during the day. I stole in while you slept——"

"Yes—I awoke in the middle of the night," observed Venetia, "and found all those letters upon the table. Some of them I opened, as you perceive—others I left until to-day," she added, a shade appearing upon her countenance as she recollected how the examination of her correspondence had been interrupted by the painful reflections springing from the perusal of Jocelyn's letter.

"Something has occurred to annoy your ladyship?" said Jessica, immediately observing the altered countenance of her mistress.

"Yes: amongst those letters there was one which saddened and perplexed me cruelly," answered Venetia. "But no matter. After all, perhaps, 'tis as well that this discovery should have been made at once," she added in a musing tone: then suddenly brightening up, she proceeded to open the letters that remained as yet unread from the previous night's examination. "What astounding impudence!" she suddenly cried as her looks settled in astonishment upon the signature of one of the letters. "But is it possible that the pearls were sent by *him?*"

"To whom does your ladyship allude?" asked Jessica.

"To the Marquis of Leveson," was the response: and Venetia proceeded to run her eyes over the letter which she held in her hand and the contents of which were as follow:—

"*Leveson House, December* 11th, 1814.

"The Marquis of Leveson presents his most respectful regards to Lady Sackville, and begs her acceptance of the trifle accompanying this note. The Marquis is well aware that it is an act of great presumption and boldness on his part thus to intrude himself even for a single instant upon the notice of Lady Sackville: but inasmuch as he strives to address her in the profoundest humility and with every feeling of respect, he ventures to hope that Lady Sackville will accord him a full and complete pardon for the past. The Marquis is profoundly grieved at having so deeply incurred the displeasure of Lady Sackville; and while he is resolved most faithfully and honourably to fulfil the compact so recently entered into with her ladyship, through the medium of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, he believes and hopes that it is no infringement of that compact thus to lay his homage at the feet of Lady Sackville, and beseech her forgiveness for all bygone offences.

"To prove that the Marquis of Leveson is unfeignedly sincere in his desire to enter into the good graces of Lady Sackville, and that he would gladly and joyously seek any opportunity to manifest his friendship and his respectful devotion towards her ladyship, he begs to state that the *hundred pearls* now sent to Lady Sackville represent *as many thousand pounds;* and if Lady Sackville would so far forget her antipathy towards the Marquis of Leveson as to grant him an interview, he would explain in a few words how the accompanying string of pearls can possibly be of such pecuniary value to her ladyship."

"What on earth can the drivelling old idiot mean?" exclaimed Venetia, too much amazed to be indignant: then having handed the letter to Jessica, she inquired, after a pause, "Can you understand what he aims at?"

"There is some artifice concealed beneath this appearance of profound respect," observed Jessica: "but if I were your ladyship I would see the Marquis and ascertain what his real meaning can be. It would appear at first sight as if, in some way or another, he was offering your ladyship a hundred thousand pounds: for, as he says, there are a *hundred* pearls upon this string, and the letter declares that each one is worth a *thousand.* How he can make this out, I do not understand: because, beautiful as as the pearls may be, they are worth at the outside but a few hundreds——"

"Oh! if he think to purchase my favours with even a hundred thousand pounds," exclaimed Venetia, the glow of triumph suffusing her countenance, and her lips curling haughtily at the same time,—"he is much mistaken. What! I—young, rich, and beautiful as I am—to abandon myself to such a loathsome mass of corruption as that man! No—no—ten thousand times no! But nevertheless, for the sake of gratifying my curiosity, I will see him in order to ascertain what he means. Go you, Jessica, to Leveson House, see the Marquis yourself—and tell him that he may call upon me at mid-day precisely. I will not write a line to him—nor will I send a message by any save a confidential person such as you, for the Marquis shall never have reason to boast of my favours—and the world shall never have the slightest pretence for saying, that Lady Sackville surrendered herself to such a superannuated sensualist! Those admirers on whom I do bestow my favours, must be the young, the handsome, and the attractive—not the old, the ugly, and the repulsive. 'Tis sufficient," she murmured to herself, "to be compelled to submit to the embraces of a horrid sensualist such as the Prince."

Jessica hastened away to Leveson House—obtained an interview with the Marquis—and delivered the message from Venetia. The nobleman was scarcely able to conceal the delight which he experienced at a result that he had evidently hardly ventured to anticipate; and in his joy he thrust a bank-note for twenty guineas into Jessica's hands. The abigail, charmed with this munificence, returned to Carlton House, saying to herself, "After all, Lord Leveson is not such a very nasty-looking man; and if I were in her ladyship's place—— But no matter: I dare say it will end as his lordship wishes: for that he *does* hope and expect to win her ladyship, is evident enough."

Punctual at the appointed hour, the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance at Carlton House, and was conducted to the drawing-room where Venetia, attired in an elegant morning-dress, was waiting to receive him. Rising from her seat in a manner coldly courteous, she saluted him with a formal inclination of her head; and slightly indicating a chair, she resumed her own place on the sofa. The Marquis, whose looks and bearing indicated the most respectful admiration, took the seat thus formally offered him; and with the courteous ease of polished breeding, he said, "May I flatter myself that your ladyship has deigned to forgive me for the past?"

"There are insults and outrages," replied

Venetia, coldly, "which cannot be consigned to oblivion,—at the same time they may be so far pardoned as to permit the individuals themselves to meet in society and exchange the usual courtesies of acquaintanceship."

"To be restored to your ladyship's favour on any terms will prove an indescribable relief to my feelings," said the Marquis, with a low bow and a half-smile.

"I now await," observed Venetia, with a slight curling of the lip and elevation of the head, as much as to imply that she would not condescend to take notice of the remark the nobleman had just made and in which he had chosen to assume that he was restored to her favour,—"I am awaiting the explanation of a certain passage in your lordship's letter, relative to these trinkets:"—and she pointed towards the pearls which lay in the jewel-case upon the table.

"The passage was doubtless ambiguous to your ladyship," said the Marquis; "and I purposely left it so—inasmuch as a full explanation of my meaning, if unasked and uninvited by you, might be construed into a breach of the compact entered into between us the other day under such peculiar circumstances at my house."

"Proceed, my lord," said Venetia, in a tone of mild command; "and give me your explanation without any farther preface."

"Then, of whatever nature this explanation may be," said the Marquis, inquiringly, "you grant me full permission beforehand to offer it? and you will not hold whatever I may say to be a violation of the future line of conduct enjoined to me on your behalf by Sir Douglas Huntingdon?"

"I give your lordship free permission to speak plainly," answered Venetia. "But understand me well—it is curiosity, *and curiosity alone*, which prompted me to grant this interview, and now induces me to listen to the explanation which your lordship may have to give."

"I am honoured and delighted by being admitted to your ladyship's presence on any terms," responded the Marquis of Leveson, with another low bow: then, taking the string of pearls from the table, he said, "Your ladyship has recently entered upon a career the most brilliant, the most triumphant, and the most resplendent: but you will find that it is the most costly and the most expensive. The sources of your income must necessarily be limited to certain bounds: but, on the other hand, boundless will be the constantly recurring drains made in a thousand ways upon your purse. Forgive me for thus turning the discourse upon so vile a subject as *money*. My experience in the world is greater than yours: and you will soon find that my words are true. Therefore is it that I propose to constitute myself *your banker in reserve*, when your regular banker shall be overdrawn. Here are a hundred pearls upon this string; and *each one*, when presented to me by your own hand, shall be considered equivalent to a cheque or draft for *a thousand pounds*. You may present them singly, or as many as you like at a time—or all at the same moment if you choose—and the demand shall be duly honoured. I thus open for your ladyship's use a credit, as your *banker in reserve*, for one hundred thousand pounds."

"And what condition is attached to this unheard-of munificence?" asked Venetia, with a satirical smile: "for I am well aware that your lordship is playing the usurer with me in one way or another."

"Yes—frankly I admit that it is so," replied the Marquis of Leveson. "I am purposely, seriously, and deliberately laying out my money at a satisfactory interest."

"And that interest?" said Venetia, interrogatively.

"Your love," rejoined the Marquis, gazing at her fixedly in the face, in order to observe how she would take the answer just given.

"My love?" she echoed, with a voice and look which showed that she had anticipated the reply. "I am certainly flattered at the high value you set upon it. But do you really propose to purchase what you term my *love* for one hundred thousand pounds?"

"Let not such a word as *purchase* pass between us," said the nobleman. "In a spirit of speculative friendship, I open to you a credit on my purse to the amount named—with the understanding, that on that day and in that hour when you shall present the *last* pearl of the hundred upon this string, you will not retreat from my arms when I fling them around your neck and say, '*Venetia you are mine!*'"

"You have now proved yourself explicit indeed," observed Lady Sackville. "I will not be angry with you—nor will I ridicule you for the proposal you have made. Nor shall I return the pearls——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Marquis in a subdued tone of triumph; "then you consent to the proposition?"

"I consent to it thus far," returned Venetia, rising from her seat,—"that if I ever *do* present these symbolic cheques upon you, my self-constituted banker in reserve, I shall consider myself bound by the most solemn and sacred ties of honour to pay you the interest for which you have stipulated. But believe me, my lord," she added, with a smile most sweetly wicked and ravishingly malicious as it revealed her ivory teeth,—"believe me, my lord, when I assure you that these pearls, so far from ever returning into your hands, will be retained in my jewel-coffer as a proof that under no possible circumstances could Lady Sackville dream of selling herself to the Marquis of Leveson!"

"We shall see," said the nobleman, with a low bow.

"Yes—we shall see," answered Venetia, with a cold and reserved salutation.

The Marquis of Leveson then took his departure well pleased with the result of his interview, and confident of beholding the success of his extraordinary proceeding at no very distant date.

Immediately on his return to Albemarle Street he sent his confidential valet Brockman in search of Captain Tash; and in the course of the day the redoubtable officer was discovered in the act of chastising, or what he called "administering the bastinado" to the keeper of an eating-house for having kept him waiting five minutes past the hour at which his dinner was ordered to be ready. The man Robin had shrunk into a corner of the room, where he was endeavouring to contract himself into as small a space as possible; and as for the eating-house-keeper himself, he was receiving the captain's blows with as much meekness as possible, seeing that the gallant officer, who for some months past had been in possession of ample funds, was one of his best customers. The entrance of Brockman put

an end to the scene; and Captain Tash, followed by his man Robin, hastened to accompany the valet to Albemarle Street. The Captain was there introduced into Leveson House, while Robin remained standing bold upright against a lamp-post at a little distance.

"Now, my good fellow," said the Marquis, when the Captain and he were alone together, "I wish you to do me a service, in which there is money to be earned. I need not ask whether you are acquainted with Lord and Lady Sackville: for well do I remember the part which you played in their behalf at Colonel Malpas's house a couple of months ago. What I require you to do is to throw yourself in Lord Sackville's way—to insinuate yourself into his confidence—to obtain a hold upon him—to make yourself necessary to him—to lead him into all kinds of pleasures and dissipations—to induce him to gamble—in a word, to plunge him into every species of extravagance. Find out jewellers, horse-dealers, and all kinds of persons who will give him credit—but no bill discounters to lend him money to pay the liabilities which he may thus contract. I wish you, Captain Tash," continued the Marquis, "to do everything to render Lord Sackville extravagant and a spendthrift: for I have a particular object to serve, which it is not necessary to explain to you, but which can only be carried out by plunging Sackville into debts and difficulties. And mind—if you can succeed in doing all this, never fail to urge him to apply to his wife for money when he wants it. Let him be importunate too with her—for she *can*, and she *must*, find him the means to gratify his extravagances—so that you must not allow him to take any refusal from her. Come to me from time to time, not only to report progress, but also to receive such recompense as I may consider you to deserve. There are a hundred guineas as an earnest of my liberality. So, to work at once—and let not the grass grow underneath your feet."

Captain Tash readily undertook a commission which promised to be so lucrative; and making his bow to the Marquis he strode forth from Leveson House with such an awful swagger in his gait, and with his huge hat stuck so much on one side, that even his man Robin was astounded at the demeanour of his master.

"Follow me, my good and faithful servant," said Tash, with the air of a king addressing a subject.

"Where to?" asked Robin, shrinking back as if he were about to condense himself into the thinness of the lamp-post against which he had been planted.

"Where to?" ejaculated Tash, with inconceivable magnificence of look: "why, to Carlton House, to be sure!"—and giving his huge life-preserver a terrific thump upon the pavement, he turned and walked along with so grand an air that a stranger would have thought all Albemarle Street belonged to him.

"Well, I wonder what is in the wind now," said Robin to himself as he sneaked stealthily along at a humble distance behind his master, like a spaniel at the heels of a bull-dog.

CHAPTER CXXI.

THE FIVE THOUSAND GUINEAS.

The reader will be kind enough to remember that Mr. Emmerson wrote a letter to the Countess of Curzon, beseeching an early interview with her, inasmuch as he had a certain communication to make relative to Colonel Malpas. Now, as Editha well knew that this letter had passed through her husband's hands and had of course been read by him, she was not imprudent enough either to call upon the money-broker at his office, or give him any appointment elsewhere. But she sent her faithful confidante Gertrude to explain to him how his letter had been intercepted by her husband and read by him before it reached her hands.

The astute and sharp-witted abigail proceeded to acquit herself of this commission: and repairing to Nicholas Lane at about eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the day following the memorable incidents at Lady Wenlock's, she obtained an immediate interview with Mr. Emmerson. This took place in his own private room; but Theodore Varian, who was listening at the door the whole time, overheard everything that passed between his master and Gertrude.

"What on earth could have thus suddenly raised the suspicion of his lordship?" exclaimed the bill-broker, in mingled astonishment and dismay, when Gertrude had delivered to him the message of the Countess.

"I know not sir," responded the abigail: "or rather I should observe that it is perfectly intelligible how his lordship's suspicions are always excited *now*, relative to her ladyship—since that terrible night when I had to lower myself from the window in Grosvenor Street, and hasten to Soho Square to warn her ladyship and you of what was going on——"

"To be sure!" observed Emmerson, much bewildered, and trembling all over. "As you say, it is natural indeed that his lordship's suspicions should always be awake. But what will be the result of all this? I tremble to think of it. There will be actions for *crim. con.*—exposure—damages—and so forth."

"Mr. Emmerson, I am ashamed of you," said Gertrude with indignation. "I did not come hither to hear you whine and pine on your own account, but to listen to what you have to say relative to Colonel Malpas——"

"Ah! the villain," cried Emmerson: "he has written me a long letter, explaining his position. He says that I have been the means of ruining him by locking him up in gaol—that his creditors have seized all his furniture and plate, and sold off everything at his house—and that his wife has gone back to her relations who will not do anything for him. He says also that he has four courses left open for adoption: one is to commit suicide, which he does not admire—the second is to stay in prison all his life, which he does not fancy—the third is to go to the Insolvents' Court, from which he would be certain to be sent back—and the fourth is to turn rogue and rascal in right down earnest, so as to liberate himself in spite of all consequences. This last course is the one he proposes to adopt: and what do you think he means?"

"I really cannot tell," answered Gertrude. "Pray explain."

"With all the cool impudence and brazen effrontery imaginable," continued Emmerson, "he assures me in his letter, that unless I choose to liberate him from the King's Bench, he shall send and inform the Countess of Curzon that he will make public all the particulars of his amour with her——"

"The villain!" ejaculated Gertrude, her whole frame trembling with indignation; for we have already said that she was accustomed to identify herself with the interests of her much-loved mistress. "But what could he mean by thus writing to you his threats relative to the Countess? Does he suspect that there is anything between her ladyship and yourself?"

"I fear so," responded Emmerson. "He is very sharp—as all such rascals are. Remember—since you are acquainted with everything that regards your mistress—it was at Mrs. Gale's that I overheard the conversation between Malpas and the Countess——"

"Yes, yes," observed Gertrude, impatiently: "it was concerning the forged bills. You were introduced into the house and placed in an adjacent room that night by Malpas himself——"

"And since then Malpas has doubtless heard, although he be in prison," resumed the bill-broker, "that I have visited at Lady Lechmere's and have become to a certain degree intimate with Lady Curzon. Think you, then, that a cunning fellow like Malpas will not suspect how it was that I thus became a visitor at Lady Lechmere's?—will he not put two and two together?—does he not know full well the *services* which Lady Lechmere has been in the habit of rendering the Countess? and will he not now naturally suppose that I have been introduced thither in order that *the same services* may be rendered for the advantage of the Countess and myself? Besides, if once his suspicions in that respect were aroused, he would have thought nothing of employing a spy to watch the movements of myself and Editha: or, intimate as he is with Mrs. Gale, he may have heard from her lips——"

"Yes—I see that there are a hundred ways in which Colonel Malpas may have been led to suspect your intimacy with her ladyship; and we will take it for granted that he does so. Now tell me precisely what it is he threatens——"

"That he will apply to Lady Curzon to use her influence with me to liberate him: and if she will not consent, that he will expose her in every way—'*and in more ways*,' he says, with a diabolical ambiguity, '*than she dreams of*.' Now, then, you know the worst. What is to be done?"

"What is to be done?" exclaimed Gertrude: "how can you ask me such a question? There is but one course—and that is to stop his mouth by yielding instantaneous compliance with his demands. In a word, give him his liberty."

"Most assuredly, if your mistress shall desire it," said Emmerson. "But recollect that by thus showing myself frightened at his menaces, I shall as it were be admitting that I myself have something to fear from his threatened exposure of her ladyship. He will be led to practise farther extortions—he will become a tyrant over us——"

"It cannot be helped," interrupted Gertrude, impatiently: "we must think only of to-day, and wait till to-morrow comes before we trouble ourselves concerning the cares it may bring. But have you anything better to propose?—you seem to be reflecting——"

"Yes—I was thinking whether it would not be much more prudent," said Emmerson, "if I were to ride it with a high hand towards Malpas and refer him entirely to the Countess. Then her ladyship might send him over the money—(with which of course I should provide her)—to free himself from prison by these means. There would thus be an avoidance of anything like an admission of an amour between myself and her ladyship. Such a precaution would leave no room for future menaces on the part of Malpas with respect to the Countess and me——"

"I understand you perfectly well," said Gertrude with a peculiar smile; "and I approve of your suggestions. But whatever is to be done, let it be done quickly: because the Countess will be in a painful state of suspense until I return."

"We will arrange the proceeding off-hand," said Emmerson. "In the first place, see what I shall write to Malpas."

The money-broker accordingly sat down and penned the following letter:—

"Nicholas Lane, December 12th, 1814.

"Mr. Emmerson presents his compliments to Colonel Malpas and begs to inform him that he has received with mingled astonishment and indignation the letter which Colonel Malpas has written, and in which certain threats are contained relative to a lady whose name Mr. Emmerson forbears from mentioning. Mr. Emmerson is but slightly acquainted with that lady: and under ordinary circumstances he should decline being the means of conveying to her ladyship any such unmanly threats. But inasmuch as he has previously had to arrange a very unpleasant affair relative to certain bills of exchange wherein Colonel Malpas and the lady aforesaid were engaged, he will once again so far intrude upon that lady's notice as to make her acquainted with the new dangers that now menace her from her unfortunate acquaintance with such a man as Colonel Malpas."

"That will do excellently," said Gertrude. "Coward, poltroon, and unprincipled scoundrel though he be, he would not for his own sake show such a letter as that to anybody! And now, what is the next step?" she inquired.

"The next step," answered Emmerson, "is for me to provide five thousand guineas, which Lady Curzon will have to send over to Colonel Malpas with some appropriate letter which she will know full well how to write in the proper spirit: and as he will have to pay that amount to my solicitor in order to release himself, the money will come back to me again in the course of a few days—and therefore it will be all the same in the end. Let me see," added Emmerson, consulting his watch: "it is now half-past eleven. Hasten you back to Grosvenor Street—explain everything to the Countess—and let her have the note ready written for Colonel Malpas. I will send up the money at three o'clock: it must be in notes and gold, and not in a cheque, because of course Colonel Malpas is not to know from whom her ladyship receives it."

"But for heaven's sake," cried Gertrude, "take care how you send the money—remember that his lordship the Earl may open any letter or parcel addressed to the Countess——"

"True!" ejaculated Emmerson: then after a few moments' reflection, he said, "Be you on the look-out precisely as the clock strikes three, and I

will either call myself or else send some confidential person to Grosvenor Street with a parcel directed to her ladyship. The amount shall all be in notes; so that if I send, the messenger will not know what it contains."

"At three o'clock precisely, then, either yourself or some one on your behalf will call," said Gertrude. "It is not likely that I shall have an opportunity of waiting about in the hall; but the parcel can be given to the hall-porter, and all will be right."

With this understanding Gertrude and the money-broker separated. But we need hardly observe that at the moment when Theodore Varian heard the lady's-maid taking leave of his employer, he retreated rapidly from the door at which he had been listening, and resumed his seat on the high stool at the desk, where he appeared to be writing away with as much earnestness as if he had not for a single moment interrupted his own labours or diverted his attention to any other object.

Shortly after Gertrude's departure Mr. Emmerson went out to procure the money which he had to send to the Countess of Curzon. He had not so much in his banker's hands—for, in fact, he had over-drawn considerably of late in order to minister to her extravagances, as we have already informed the reader. But he had plenty of other resources, and had no fear of experiencing any difficulty in obtaining the amount by the hour named.

Meantime, the instant the money-broker went out, Theodore Varian penned the following note to the Earl of Curzon:—

"At three o'clock to-day a parcel containing bank notes to the amount of five thousand guineas, and addressed to the Countess, will be left at your lordship's house. The sum is intended to be sent over to the King's Bench to release Colonel Malpas from prison. The parcel will either be given into the hands of Gertrude, or of the hall porter—and to no one else.

"Your lordship's humble servant,

"T.V."

In about half-an-hour the office-boy, who had been upon some errand, returned; and Varian then had an opportunity of slipping out for a few minutes. Giving the note to a ticket-porter, he charged him to repair with all possible speed to Grosvenor Street and deliver it into the hands of the Earl of Curzon himself. The messenger hurried away to execute his commission; and Theodore returned into the office, chuckling at the incident which had thus transpired to gratify his vindictive feelings towards Emmerson.

In the meantime Gertrude had retraced her way to Grosvenor Street and had communicated to the Countess everything that had taken place in Nicholas Lane.

"With all his infatuation for me," said Editha, in a tone of mingled spite and disgust, "this money-making citizen is particularly careful of his own personal interest and safety. He will not compromise himself in any way with Colonel Malpas; but he will allow *me* to be made the cat's-paw and tool in the matter."

"My dear lady," said Gertrude, "I saw through the money-broker's meaning all the time. In fact, his artifice is covered with a veil so exceedingly flimsy that it would be impossible not to penetrate it at once. But I appeared to give it my most cordial approval: and I *did* approve of it in reality—for, to please *me*, Mr. Emmerson cannot possibly be too guarded in respect to his connexion with your ladyship. I should be sorry indeed if any suspicions which even such a man as Colonel Malpas may have entertained in this respect, were confirmed; and I am truly glad that they will now be quite set at rest by the letter which Mr. Emmerson has written."

"I understand you, Gertrude," said Editha: "the fact is, this amour of mine with the stock-broker is one little creditable to me and of which I have no reason to be proud. But you know that it was one entirely of convenience. Embarrassed as I have been for money, I should not have known what to do without him."

"That is all well and good, my lady," said the girl; "and I do not blame you for having formed the connexion. I was only saying that I was glad when Mr. Emmerson of his own accord proposed a plan which was at once calculated to give the lie to Malpas's suspicions."

"To be sure—you have taken the proper view of the case," said Editha. "And now for the note which I am to write to the Colonel. Give me my desk. But I know not how I shall acquit myself of so unpleasant a task."

Editha made several beginnings, but tore up sheet after sheet of paper; and it was not until she had made at least a dozen attempts that she could achieve anything calculated to satisfy herself. At length she finished the following epistle:—

"One who has every reason to regret that she ever knew you—much more that she ever loved you—has just received another proof of that cowardly selfishness which prompts you to sacrifice the most sacred ties to your own immediate interests. From a gentleman in the City, to whose generous forbearance both you and I were largely indebted on a certain occasion, I have received an intimation of the menaces which you have thought fit to hold out concerning me. Were I of your own sex and subjected to only one hundredth part of this crowning insult, I should wreak a fearful vengeance upon you: but being a defenceless, frail, and erring woman, I have deemed it more prudent to succumb to the cruel extortioner. That extortioner is yourself!—and herewith I enclose you bank-notes to the amount of five thousand guineas, for which sum I am indebted to the kindness of my sisters, who with some little difficulty have made up the amount at so short a notice. Accept it then—liberate yourself—and trouble me no more. Infamous beyond all known infamy would your conduct be—dastardly beyond any cowardice which the world has yet seen—were you to make me henceforth the object of your persecutions. Surely you will appreciate how different is the treatment you receive at my hands from that which is shown towards you by your creditor Mr. Emmerson. *He* will not grant you your release without the payment of the uttermost farthing: whereas *I*, whom you have so cruelly, cruelly outraged, and whose weakness you so basely exposed to that very man,—*I* am now doing everything for you. If, then, there be a spark of generous feeling left in your soul, forbear henceforth from persecuting me!"

"Do you approve of this, Gertrude?" inquired Editha, who liked to flatter her faithful dependant by seeming to consult her on all occasions.

"Nothing can be better, my lady," was the response, after Gertrude had read the letter. "It is now half-past one o'clock—and the money is to be here at three. The Earl has not come home yet——"

"Is it not most absurd and anomalous," ex-

claimed Editha, "that a husband may absent himself from home all night and sleep where he chooses, whereas the wife can scarcely stir abroad even in the day-time without being watched and espied? No doubt but that my precious husband has passed the night in the arms of his new flame, Lady Prescott. But, thank heavens! I am not jealous. What a happiness it would be if the Earl were not jealous of me?"

"After all," observed Gertrude, "the equivoques, the freaks, the stratagems, and the artifices to which that jealousy on his part has compelled us to have recourse, constitute a rare sport and sustain an agreeable excitement. At the same time, your ladyship must really be more prudent. But—ah! that double knock at the door is the Earl's! His lordship has just come home. I wonder whether he will say anything to your ladyship when you meet, relative to the ludicrous exposures of last night."

"No," observed Editha: "he will doubtless appear just as if nothing at all particular had taken place. But you had better go at once, Gertrude, and tell the hall-porter to receive the parcel when it comes and keep it until he sees you again. He must be sure and not allow anybody to catch sight of it——"

"Trust to me," said Gertrude: and she hastened from the apartment.

Meantime the Earl of Curzon had just returned home, after having passed the night and the whole of the forenoon in the arms of Lady Prescott at Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of accommodation. Upon entering the hall, his lordship received the note which Theodore Varian had sent him; and immediately comprehending whose name the initials were intended to represent, and from what quarter the money was therefore coming, the Earl was not slow in making up his mind that such an amount, if he once succeeded in getting possession of it, should be considered his own lawful booty. He therefore stationed himself at the dining-room

window, in order to observe all arrivals at the front door.

Slowly passed the time: but at length the Earl's watch showed him that it was close upon three o'clock. And now, concealed behind the curtain, he kept his eyes intently fixed upon the front door steps. In a few minutes a well-dressed person passed in front of the house—drew a brown paper parcel from his pocket—and having consulted the direction, looked at the number on the front door, evidently to assure himself that it was the right house. Immediately afterwards he ascended the steps; and the porter, who, having been duly instructed by Gertrude, was on the watch at the hall-window, opened the door before the visitor had time to knock. This individual, who was a friend of Emmerson's, instantaneously delivered the parcel into the porter's hands, and took his hurried departure without uttering a word.

The porter closed the front door, and thrust the parcel into the capacious pocket of his scarlet livery-coat. At the same moment Gertrude came flitting down the stairs, and the Earl of Curzon issued forth from the dining-room. For an instant the lady's-maid stopped short, and hung back on the staircase in the hope that the Earl would pass on his way and leave the coast clear for her to receive the parcel from the hands of the porter. But to the ineffable dismay of Gertrude, the nobleman walked straight across the hall to where the porter had just resumed his seat in his great leathern chair.

"Was the parcel for me that just arrived?" demanded the Earl: and the words struck like the knell of doom, not only upon the ears of Gertrude, but likewise on those of the unhappy Editha who was anxiously listening on the landing above.

"Eh—what, my lord?" stammered the hall-porter, suddenly turning as crimson as his coat and then as white as his neck-cloth.

"I spoke plain enough, fellow," exclaimed the Earl, in a stern voice. "That parcel which came a moment ago—was it for me, I say?—because I was expecting one——"

"No, my lord—it was—it was—that is to say—I mean," stammered the porter, not knowing what to do, and glancing uneasily from the Earl before him to Gertrude on the stairs, then back to the Earl again.

"Show me that parcel immediately," said the nobleman, in a quick voice and with imperious manner. "Come—be prompt—give it me at once——"

"But, my lord——"

"Silence, sirrah!"

"The parcel was not for your lordship," urged the porter.

"Give it to me, I say!" thundered the Earl, as he grasped the miserable wretch by the collar.

The porter accordingly at once produced the brown paper packet: but fleet as an arrow did Gertrude bound from the stairs on which she had been hitherto transfixed; and utterly losing all her presence of mind, she screamed in wild hysterical accents, "No, no—it belongs to my mistress!"

But the Earl of Curzon gave a triumphant laugh as he seized the packet from the hand of the astounded hall-porter; and Editha, on hearing all that thus took place, rushed down the stairs in an agony of mind more easily conceived than described.

At this moment the Earl was the only one who retained anything bordering on presence of mind: and anxious to avoid a farther scene in the hall which might end by reaching the ears of the entire household, he at once hurried back into the dining-room, closely followed by the Countess and Gertrude.

"Your lordship will please to observe to whom that parcel is addressed," at once began Editha, a dead pallor appearing beneath the transparent duskiness of her complexion, and her entire frame quivering like a harp-string.

"Yes," said the Earl with a smile of satanic triumph: "it is addressed to her ladyship the Countess of Curzon!"

"Then give it to me," said Editha, advancing towards him.

"Softly, softly," he said, waving her back with one hand as he clutched the precious packet with the other. "As your husband, madam, I assert the right of opening this parcel—and that right I intend to exercise."

"You dare not!" said Editha, in a faint and dying voice.

"Behold!" he exclaimed, with sardonic malice in the look that he flung upon his writhing, agonizing wife: and tearing open the parcel, he exclaimed, "Hah! bank-notes—and what a pile of them! Nothing could have arrived more seasonably: for I have a number of pressing debts to pay."

"Good heavens! you do not—you cannot mean that you will appropriate that money?" gasped the wretched Editha;—and staggering back, she would have fallen had she not been caught in the arms of Gertrude, who placed her upon the sofa.

"If the money be sent to you," continued the Earl, "then it is *yours*—and whatever is yours, is *mine*. This is the marriage law. But here is a letter enclosed which will doubtless throw some light on the subject."

The Countess of Curzon, goaded to desperation, sprang to her feet in order to rush upon her husband and tear the letter from his hand: but a vertigo suddenly seized upon her, and she fell back again, not deprived of consciousness, but with a maddening sensation of bewilderment in the brain.

The Earl, rejoicing in his wife's agony, the extent of which he failed not to observe, tore open the letter and in a voice of terrible irony read the following lines:—

"I forward you, my adored one, the amount promised, and pray you to lose no time in despatching it to the proper quarter. Gertrude will have explained everything to you; and I am sure you will agree that it is far better for you to appear as the principal agent in this matter, than for me to yield to the villain's threats.

"Your's ever affectionately."

"No name—eh?" exclaimed the Earl. "But there is no difficulty in guessing who is the writer. In fact, I know Emmerson's penmanship well enough. But let us see how much we have here. One—two—three—four—" and he went on counting the bank-notes, each for one hundred pounds, until at length he exclaimed, "five thousand guineas, on my soul! Well, this is a lucky windfall——"

"But you cannot—you will not—you dare not self-appropriate it," exclaimed the Countess, once more

springing to her feet. "Do you not see," she exclaimed, in an hysterical tone, "that it is intended for a special purpose?"

"But supposing that I, as your husband, consider that your funds would be misapplied," exclaimed the Earl, "unless they went to pay my debts—have I not a right to exercise my judgment in the matter?"

"Let there be open war between us, if you will," exclaimed Editha, well nigh driven to madness; "but give me that money—for it is not mine—it is merely entrusted to me——"

"This is absurd!" exclaimed the Earl. "The money is sent to you—this note proves it—and once more I say that what is yours is mine."

The Countess again sank back upon the sofa with reeling brain and bursting heart, while her husband, hastily securing the Bank-notes about his person was hurrying from the room, when he accidentally dropped Emmerson's unsigned letter. His hand, was upon the door ere he perceived it; and at the same instant, swift as the eagle swoops upon its prey, did Gertrude bound forward and seize upon that letter. Then thrusting it into her bosom, she seemed to concentrate all the lustre of her fine dark eyes in order to fling one burning, scorching glance of hatred and of indignation upon the Earl.

For a moment he seemed inclined to tear the document from her; but suddenly changing his mind, he said, "After all, you are welcome to the letter, since I retain the Bank-notes. Without a signature, and ambiguous in its wording as it is, it is valueless as a piece of evidence:"—then turning a look of sardonic triumph upon his wife, he said, "Your ladyship exposed me last night, but I think you will agree that you are paying rather dear for it to-day. Were I not satisfied with the vengeance which accident has thus enabled me to wreak, I should at once take and turn this insolent lady's-maid of yours out of the house. As it is, with five thousand guineas in my pocket, I can afford to be generous."

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon strode out of the room; and when the door closed behind him, Editha and Gertrude remained gazing in speechless consternation upon each other.

CHAPTER CXXII.

ANOTHER SUM OF FIVE THOUSAND GUINEAS.

"What a dreadful calamity!" said Editha at length, a visible shudder passing through her form as if she had to deplore the sudden death of some very near relation.

"Dreadful indeed!" echoed the maid; "it seems scarcely credible—it appears like a horrible dream!"—then, after a brief pause she observed, "But fortunately I possessed myself of Mr. Emmerson's note:" and drawing it forth from her bosom, she at once threw it into the fire.

"What is to be done?" asked Editha, utterly bewildered.

"Shall I go off at once to Mr. Emmerson and explain everything?" said Gertrude.

"Yes—that is the only alternative," answered the Countess. "But will he believe the tale? or will he regard it as a base subterfuge to cover an infamous cheat on my part? Will he not fancy, in a word, that I am seeking to self-appropriate the money?"

"I must work upon his feelings to produce the contrary impression," said Gertrude: "I must speak to him of your love—your devotion towards him—and your despair at what has taken place ——"

"Be quick then, Gertrude—depart at once," said the Countess. "Mr. Emmerson leaves the City between four and five—and there is yet time."

The unhappy Editha hastened up-stairs to her boudoir, there to ruminate in solitude upon the calamity which had just occurred, and to rack her brain with a thousand useless conjectures as to the cause which could possibly have led her husband to seize upon that parcel. In the meantime Gertrude sallied forth to pay Mr. Emmerson another visit in Nicholas Lane.

Two hours elapsed, during which interval the Countess of Curzon gave way to an infinite variety of disagreeable and bewildering reflections. To what end could this warfare with her husband possibly lead? At one moment she triumphed—at another she was forced to endure the most perilous defeats: and in the long run would she not be crushed altogether? The gloom deepened around her soul as these thoughts were forced upon her; and in acute suspense did she await Gertrude's return. It was half-past five when the abigail came back; and the moment she entered the boudoir, the expression of her countenance at once convinced Editha that she had failed in her mission.

"Have you seen him?" she said, in a quick voice which showed that suspense was agony.

"No, dear lady," answered Gertrude: "I have not seen Mr. Emmerson. Everything is turning against us. Pressing business, transpiring all of a sudden, has compelled him to depart post-haste on a long journey. I saw his head clerk, Mr. Varian—that young man, you know, whom he has so generously taken back into his service ——"

"Well, well—go on, for heaven's sake!" said Editha.

"Mr. Varian told me that Mr. Emmerson had received a letter between three and four o'clock—it was a letter from the Continent, I think he said—which compelled him to start off at once. The whole affair was so sudden that Mr. Emmerson had scarcely time to write even a note to his wife. Had I been half-an-hour earlier I should have just arrived in time to see him ere he stepped into the post-chaise ——"

"But when will he return?" asked Editha, still in an agony of suspense.

"Alas! dear lady," replied Gertrude, "it is altogether uncertain. He told Mr. Varian that he should be absent at least ten days——"

"Good heavens!" said Editha, clasping her hands; "and in the meantime I may be ruined. Oh! the fatal folly of that tortuous and round-about plan of his to silence the villain Malpas!"

"It is useless repining," said Gertrude. "Let us, with our usual courage, look the matter boldly in the face."

"Well, I will do so," said the Countess, assuming a forced composure. "It is quite clear, Gertrude, that something must immediately be done. Malpas

is capable of any atrocity; and now that he has once begun to threaten, he will not leave me alone. Emmerson's letter, which he wrote this morning in your presence, and of which you approved, has reached Malpas by this time; and he will of course expect to hear shortly from me. Where can I procure five thousand guineas? My sisters—all my relatives—are away from town at this moment——"

"I have it, dear lady!" suddenly exclaimed Gertrude. "Lord Sackville——"

"Oh! I could not possibly ask him such a thing," cried the Countess. "Remember, he has not as yet received the crowning favour from me—and it would appear as if I were actually bargaining for the sale of myself——"

"No such thing!" rejoined Gertrude, impetuously: "every lady of rank either gives money to her paramour, or else receives money from him. Besides, in this frightful emergency which is better—to lay yourself under an obligation to Lord Sackville? or to stand the chance of annoyance, vexation, and exposure at the hands of Colonel Malpas? Moreover," continued Gertrude, "now that Emmerson has written to tell the Colonel he has communicated the latter's threats to you——"

"Yes—I understand," said Editha: "the Colonel will be expecting some kind of communication from me. When first he was in prison he wrote to me—and I sent back his letters unread. Now he may avenge himself upon me—"

"And remember," added Gertrude, "that inasmuch as the Earl appears resolved to open every letter and parcel coming to the house, it may happen that Colonel Malpas will write to your ladyship and that his letter may fall into his lordship's hands. If so, there would doubtless be grounds at once for separation and divorce: for depend upon it, the Colonel will not be delicate in his allusions to past affairs when once he does take up his pen to address your ladyship in the same threatening way he has already adopted in writing to Mr. Emmerson."

"Yes—I see all the perils of my position," observed Editha: "and this Malpas must be silenced at any cost."

"And at any sacrifice, my lady," added Gertrude, emphatically. "There is consequently no alternative but to apply to Lord Sackville——"

"I shall never dare look him in the face to ask him such a thing," said Editha, wringing her hands.

"Then entrust the matter to me," exclaimed Gertrude. "Write his lordship a note, stating that you have the most urgent—the most imperative—and indeed the most cruel need for five thousand guineas; and I will take it myself to Carlton House."

"But suppose that Sackville has not such a sum at his command?" observed Editha.

"Then he can procure it," rejoined Gertrude, who never would allow herself to recognise difficulties in her path if she could possibly see beyond them.

The Countess of Curzon sate down to her desk and penned a hasty note to Lord Sackville in the sense which Gertrude had suggested: and when it was duly folded and sealed, the indefatigable abigail sallied forth again and betook herself to Carlton House. But here we must leave her for a few minutes in order to see what was passing within the walls of that palatial residence.

It was now verging towards seven o'clock—Venetia was dining *tête à-tête* with the Prince—and her husband, Lord Sackville, was entertaining Captain Tash also at a *tête-à-tête* dinner in his own room. The reader will remember how it was that the gallant captain had been led, in the afternoon, to pay his respects to Lord Sackville; and although Horace had no very high opinion of that gentleman, he nevertheless could not help entertaining a grateful remembrance of the manner in which he had come forward to vindicate Venetia against the representations of Colonel Malpas. Lord Sackville had therefore received Captain Tash with an appearance of cordiality; and luncheon being ordered, the gallant officer became so enamoured of the Madeira and Port that he did not offer to move till he had emptied a couple of decanters. Just then Horace received a message from Venetia to the effect that the Prince wished her to dine alone with him; and not having anything particular to do, he invited Tash to stay and pass the remainder of the day with him. Such a proposal was by no means to be refused; and as Robin had been consigned to the hospitable care of Lord Sackville's valet, the gallant officer found himself altogether placed in circumstances the most congenial to his sense of enjoyment. The reader may be well assured that he did as ample justice to the dinner served up in the evening as he had shown towards the lunch in the afternoon; and Horace happened to be in one of those humours when the rattling, offhand, miscellaneous conversation of such a man as Tash was welcomed as the means of dispelling *ennui*.

The Captain, keeping in view the mission which he had received from the Marquis of Leveson, failed not to speak of all the pleasures, delights, and enjoyments of London life in the most rapturous terms; and he described various places of recreation and amusement with which Horace was previously unacquainted except by name. Tash likewise made his noble host understand that it was absolutely necessary for him to have an excellent stud of horses, in order to sustain the dignity of his position; and Horace, well knowing that his gallant friend was a good judge of horseflesh, at once gave him an order to procure a few thoroughbreds. After continuing in this strain for some time, the captain—who, by the by, was drinking his wine out of tumblers, he having a mortal contempt for such "thimblefuls" as wine-glasses—launched forth into the most magniloquent praises of Lady Sackville; and at length, slapping his noble entertainer familiarly upon the shoulder, he exclaimed, "You possess a treasure of a wife, my lord—a veritable treasure, my lord! And mark—I, Rolando Tash, tell you so. If anybody dares deny it, I will flay him alive. My man Robin admires her—and he is no bad judge, let me tell you: and all the world admires her, which is of course very flattering for your lordship. But when I say that her ladyship is a treasure, I mean what I say. In fact——And here, my lord, I can't do better than drink my nineteenth tumbler of Port to her ladyship's health——in fact," continued Tash, having drained the capacious glass, "her ladyship is a treasure of beauty and a treasure of wealth. Depend upon it that whatever money your lordship might require for your own purposes, her ladyship can obtain it——"

"What on earth do you mean!" demanded Horace, not knowing whether the captain meant to allude to Venetia's somewhat equivocal position or not.

"Never do you mind, my lord, what I mean," answered the Captain, as he despatched his twentieth tumbler: "I mean what I say—and you may be assured that I know what I mean. Only just try the next time you want money, and ask her ladyship to be your banker. The fact is, she possesses a secret mine of wealth unknown to your lordship, and which I only discovered by accident. A little bird whispered it in my ears——"

At this moment a footman entered, and made a whispered communication to Lord Sackville to the effect that a young female, who gave the name of *Miss Gertrude*, wished to see him immediately in the adjacent parlour. Apologising to Captain Tash on account of leaving him for a few minutes,—Lord Sackville hastened to the next apartment, where Gertrude put Editha's note into his hand. Horace immediately perused it: but the reader must not fancy that he was very much surprised at the request contained therein—for, as Gertrude had observed to her mistress, that was an age when every titled lady was either a lender or borrower in respect to her paramour. Besides, whist and faro were all the rage in fashionable life, and many ladies were such desperate gamesters that they lost or won thousands in the course of the year. It therefore instantaneously struck Lord Sackville that the Countess of Curzon had contracted one of those "debts of *honour*" (Oh! the vile prostitution of the term!)—which must be paid at once, and hence the interpretation of the cruel need which her ladyship experienced for the money. On hinting this idea to Gertrude, she hastened to confirm it,—adding that her mistress was in such a dreadful state of mind for fear of being disgraced by any delay in the payment of the debt, that she was well nigh distracted.

"Distracted indeed!" exclaimed Horace, as he turned away from the abigail, and began walking in an agitated manner to and fro: for he himself felt distracted at being thus applied to for an amount which he had no means of procuring at the moment.

What on earth was he to do? Not for worlds would he refuse thus to befriend Lady Curzon: and yet he could not possibly see how he was to raise the money. Suddenly the extraordinary yet very significant remark of Captain Tash recurred to his mind. Could Venetia assist him?—had his wife really some peculiar resources unknown to him? It was scarcely possible. Being acquainted with all her previous history, he did not see how this could be. And yet Tash had spoken with the air of a man well assured of what he asserts. At all events there could be no harm in trying: the case was desperate—and Horace caught eagerly at any hope.

Bidding Gertrude wait a few minutes, Horace quitted the room and repaired to that part of the palace in which the Prince Regent's own private apartments were situated. Waiting in an anteroom, he sent in a footman with a message to his wife to the effect that he wished to speak to her for a few minutes. It happened at the moment that the Prince, after a somewhat early dinner with Venetia, had drunk so copiously that he had just fallen asleep upon the sofa; and therefore his lovely mistress was enabled at once to come forth in compliance with her husband's summons.

"Is anything the matter, Horace?" she inquired, immediately perceiving that there was a certain uneasiness and agitation in his manner.

"My dear Venetia," he answered, "I wish to consult you as to what I am to do in a particular embarrassment which has just sprung up. A year or two ago—long before I was acquainted with you—I contracted a debt under peculiar circumstances. It was a debt of honour—and up to this moment I have never even been asked for the money. *Now* it is suddenly demanded of me: and unless paid to-night or to-morrow morning, the person to whom it is due will be utterly and totally ruined. An exposure of his affairs will take place,—my name will be implicated——In fact, Venetia, it is serious—very serious."

"But how on earth, Horace, can I assist you?" she exclaimed.

"I do not know," he responded in an agitated manner. "But women are so ingenious—and you of all women possess such a readiness at expedients——"

"But is it really so very, very serious?" she demanded, looking him fixedly in the face.

"On my soul," he replied, trembling with uncertainty as to the result, "it is most serious: and unless I can pay this amount my very character will be compromised to a frightful degree. Young in the peerage as we are, and having by our sudden rise excited so many jealousies, envies, and hatreds, our position is a delicate one; and such an exposure would be most disastrous—most ruinous——"

"Well, Horace, console yourself," said Venetia. "Fortunately I have a little hoard from some private gifts of the Prince——However," she cried suddenly, "I have not time now to enter into particulars. Go back to your wine and your guests, whoever you may have with you—and in an hour come up to me in my boudoir. You shall then have the money."

"Ten thousand, thousand thanks, Venetia!" exclaimed Horace: then as he embraced her, he said, "If we are not the most devoted lovers in the world, or the most faithful and exemplary husband and wife, we are at all events the very best of friends."

"And that is perhaps better," answered Venetia. "But I must now return to the Prince—and in an hour you will come to me in my boudoir."

They then separated. Horace went back to Gertrude, to tell her to wait an hour as he had sent for the money; and then returning to Captain Tash, he proceeded to question this gallant gentleman relative to the secret resources of Venetia. But Tash,—little suspecting, however, that accident had so speedily put Lord Sackville in the way of testing the experiment in the matter,—could be induced to say nothing more than that "what he said, he knew was to be relied on."

In the meantime Venetia, instead of returning to the Prince Regent, whom she had left snoring and half-drunk on the sofa, hastened up to her boudoir; and summoning Jessica, she hurriedly communicated her intention to that faithful dependant. Enveloping themselves each in a thick cloak, and putting on plain straw hats with ample veils, they prepared to sally forth. But previously Venetia opened her jewel-coffer, and took off five of the pearls from the string which the Marquis of Leveson had given her. These she enveloped in a piece of paper and carefully secured in her bosom: then, accom-

panied by Jessica, she issued from the palace by means of one of the private doors.

Taking a hackney-coach in Pall Mall, they proceeded direct to Albemarle Street; and on inquiring at Leveson House if the Marquis were at home, they were at once admitted into the mansion. Being shown to a parlour on the ground-floor, they were almost immediately joined by the Marquis; and Venetia, at once raising her veil, said to the nobleman, "When I spoke so triumphantly and so positively this morning in respect to the impossibility of ever needing to use you as my banker, I did not foresee what was to happen to-night."

"If your ladyship is about to present your cheques," said the Marquis, with ill-subdued delight and surprise, "you need make no apology. The drafts shall at once be honoured."

"I tender your lordship my best thanks," said Venetia, assuming an air of cold dignity, in order to prevent her from seeming completely humiliated. "This young person," she added, observing that the Marquis was looking at Jessica, who still retained the dark veil over her countenance, "is my confidential maid."

The nobleman bowed in courteous acknowledgement of this explanation: then drawing forth his pocket-book and taking out a quantity of notes, he said, "To what amount does my fair patroness propose to draw upon her most honoured and grateful banker?"

"To this amount," answered Venetia, producing the five pearls.

"'Tis but a trifle," observed the Marquis: and he then handed Venetia Bank-notes to the amount of five thousand guineas.

"Again I thank your lordship," she said; and drawing down her veil, took her departure—the nobleman accompanying her as far as the front door and handing her into the hackney-coach.

Venetia was not altogether ten minutes inside Leveson House upon the present occasion; and as she returned homeward in company with Jessica, she observed, "I most sincerely hope that this will be the last time I shall ever have occasion to set foot in that dwelling. An apprehension of covert treachery and dark mysterious danger sate heavy upon my heart the whole time."

Alighting from the hackney-coach in Pall Mall, Venetia and her confidential maid re-entered Carlton House;—and when Horace, at the expiration of the hour, went up into his wife's boudoir, he found her seated quite alone, awaiting his presence—so that he little thought she had been compelled to sally forth during the interval in order to obtain the money which she now placed in his hand. Having duly reiterated his grateful thanks, he once more left her in order to hasten and consign the amount to Gertrude's keeping; and the abigail, infinitely delighted at the success of her mission, sped back with a light step and a still lighter heart to Grosvenor Street.

The reader may imagine far better than we can possibly describe the joy of Lady Curzon at thus so easily obtaining a second sum of five thousand guineas; and early on the following morning the amount—together with the letter which the Countess had penned in readiness, and with the contents of which the reader is already acquainted—was conveyed by the trustworthy Gertrude to the King's Bench. Delivering the parcel into the hands of a turnkey, she took her departure thence;—and never was drop of water more welcome to the Arab wanderer in the desert, than was this pecuniary succour to Colonel Malpas. He instantaneously sent for Mr. Emmerson's solicitor and coolly proposed to pay him three thousand guineas for his release: but the attorney, having already received an intimation from the money-broker relative to the Colonel's affair, and knowing therefore how he was to act, flatly refused to receive a single farthing less than the whole amount. Malpas, who was so heartily sick of imprisonment that he would have made any sacrifice to procure his liberty, accordingly handed over the entire sum to the solicitor, and was thus enabled to take his departure from the King's Bench.

But on issuing thence he found himself alone as it were upon the wide world. He knew not what to do, or whither to go. It was true that he had a few guineas in his pocket: but when they were gone, how was he to obtain farther supplies? His wife's relatives had totally discarded him; and she herself had declared that she would never see him more. The circumstance of the terrible thrashing which he had received from Captain Tash had got noised abroad at the time, together with a rumour that this punishment had been inflicted on him for having endeavoured to cheat the Prince Regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and others, out of a sum of six thousand guineas—so that every chance of finding his way back into society seemed distant enough. In plain terms, Colonel Malpas was in the unpleasant predicament of a man who found himself not only penniless, but also "cut" by all the world; and therefore, on emerging from incarceration, it was natural enough that he should ask himself over and over again what he was to do.

He wandered into a tavern near the foot of Westminster Bridge, and ordering some refreshments, sate down to reflect upon his position; and he already began to think that it were much better to have kept the five thousand guineas and remained in prison, than to have come forth penniless. For a moment it struck him that he would write to Lady Curzon and demand a few hundred pounds on the pretext that it was rendering him no service to release him from prison and leave him destitute. But to attempt any farther extortion within a few hours after the display of such bounteous munificence on her part, was an infamy even too great for Colonel Malpas to contemplate seriously, unscrupulous and heartless though he were. But still recurred the question—what was he to do?

In the midst of his bewilderment his eye casually fell upon a paragraph in a newspaper that lay before him; and in which some Court scribe had indulged in a flaming eulogium upon Lady Sackville, extolling her for so many charities, amenities, and estimable qualities, that if she had only possessed a tithe of them in reality she would have been a perfect angel. As the Colonel read this panegyric his thoughts were suddenly turned into a new channel. Venetia was assuredly generous-hearted; and moreover, she had risen to so high an eminence that she could afford to be magnanimous and forgiving. What if he were to write and implore her intervention in procuring for him the pardon of the Prince

Regent for his past misconduct? If his Royal Highness could only be induced to take him by the hand, all his former friends would flock around him again—he might get back into society, and still find means of pushing his way in the world.

The hope was a desperate one; but the man's position itself was desperate—and he could lose nothing by the trial. He accordingly proceeded to pen a most humble, contrite, and even grovelling letter to Lady Sackville—confessing himself a reptile deserving only to be trodden beneath her heel, but appealing to her generosity for pardon, and to her magnanimity for succour. He declared himself her slave, ready to lick the dust at her feet—and willing to go to the ends of the earth, if he could serve her. In fine, he wrote just such a letter as might be expected from a sneaking, paltry coward, reduced to his last shifts, and compelled to have recourse to the meanest and most humiliating of expedients.

Having despatched the letter by a messenger to Carlton House, he remained at the tavern anxiously waiting for the reply. The emissary was absent for upwards of an hour, at the expiration of which time he returned with a verbal message to the effect that Lady Sackville would grant Colonel Malpas an interview between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

The Colonel was positively astounded at this result of a proceeding adopted in utter desperation. He could scarcely believe that the messenger had delivered the verbal response aright. But the man declared that the message had been given him by a very smart and pretty-looking young damsel, having the appearance of a lady's-maid; and the Colonel was therefore reassured against the probability of error.

To be brief, he repaired to Carlton House punctually at half-past three o'clock—and a footman immediately introduced him into a drawing-room where the brilliant Venetia was awaiting his arrival. Nothing could exceed the cold grandeur and icy magnificence of demeanour with which she received him; and she made him feel that she really regarded him as a wretched worm whom she forbore from trampling under foot merely because there was a way in which she could make him serviceable. The interview lasted for nearly an hour, during which Venetia explained her views to Colonel Malpas,—offering him a certain private mission to which she proposed to attach a liberal remuneration, with a promise that if it were carried out successfully she would consider what more could be done in the Colonel's behalf. As a matter of course he cheerfully accepted the mission thus offered him; and in terms of grovelling adulation did he express his gratitude. Venetia listened to him with superb disdain: for even while she was thus giving him the means of subsistence, she made him feel that it was very far from being for his own sake, but simply because there were circumstances at the moment which thus accidentally enabled her to make use of him as a tool or instrument in the furtherance of her own mysterious purposes.

Having received a sum of money for his travelling expenses and immediate wants, Colonel Malpas took his leave of Lady Sackville; and within an hour he was on his way in a post-chaise for Dover.

In the evening of that same day the Earl of Curzon repaired to Carlton House in obedience to a summons which he had received from Venetia: and for upwards of an hour was he alone with her in earnest and serious deliberation. At the conclusion of the interview his lordship also took a post-chaise and set out on a journey to Dover.

CHAPTER CXXIII.

THE VILLA AT GENEVA.

The reader must suppose three months to have elapsed since the occurrences which we have just been relating: and the scene now changes to a beautiful villa-residence in one of the delightful suburbs of Geneva.

The house itself was spacious. The rooms on the ground-floor opened with windows reaching the ground, upon sloping lawns; and the casements of the upper storey were furnished with balconies filled with the choicest flowers. For though it was but the middle of the month of March and in England the winds blew bleak and cold, yet the season was all warmth, and brightness, and floral fragrance in the sunny south. The trees were covered with verdure—the gardens were gorgeous with flowers—and nothing could be more beautiful, nothing more picturesque than the villa-residence to which we have alluded, seated as it was upon a gentle eminence commanding a view of the lake, and surrounded by gardens and pleasure-grounds laid out in the most tasteful manner.

It was at this villa that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales—better known to the masses in this country as the Princess Caroline—was passing a short time with her retinue. The injured wife of the Prince Regent, after visiting several towns in Italy and some of the most interesting scenery of Switzerland, had suddenly taken it into her head to settle down in this secluded but charming retreat in the Genevese territory.

Her Royal Highness's suite was small, consisting altogether of only a dozen persons. There were six ladies-in-waiting, of whom Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen were the three junior: the other three had been for some time in the household of the Princess and were devoted to her interests—but, as the reader is well aware, the Misses Owen were the trained spies and secret emissaries of the conspirators who were leagued to accomplish the ruin of her Royal Highness. The principal equerry in attendance upon the Princess was the Baron Bergami, with whom she had been acquainted in her youth at her father's Court in Brunswick, and for whom at that period it was supposed she had entertained some little affection. After an interval of nineteen years, circumstances had again thrown the Baron in her way, during her recent visit to Italy; and hearing that he was poor even to actual distress, and had been very unfortunate, she at once took compassion upon him and offered him that situation which we now find him occupying in her household. In addition to those members of her suite already mentioned, we must observe that there were three pages, a young lady acting as "reader" and secretary, and two or three other females, amongst whom was

Mrs. Ranger. Such was her Royal Highness's retinue, which accompanied her on her travels: but now of course there were the menial servants, in addition thereto, at the villa—the entire household therefore consisting of upwards of twenty persons. The mansion was however large, having several detached buildings and outhouses at the back; and it was thus enabled to accomodate so large an establishment.

It was on a lovely evening, in the middle of the month of March, 1815, that Emma Owen—the second of the sisters—issued forth from a side-door of the villa, and threading a shrubbery of evergreens, entered one of the beautiful gardens where exquisite specimens of statuary appeared amongst the natural glories of the scene. A dark scarf, negligently thrown over her shoulders, set off the whiteness of her skin to great perfection, and made her charms, which the low-bodied dress left much exposed, seem absolutely dazzling. Very beautiful indeed did she appear—for on her cheeks was the heightened bloom of expectation as she emerged from the shrubbery and flung a rapid glance around the garden. Then, as she beheld a gentleman suddenly spring over the boundary wall at the extremity, she affected to be terrified: and turning suddenly back, she made a movement as if about to retrace her way towards the villa. Along the gravel walks did he bound, threading the elysian maze formed by the parterres of flowers; and as Emma did not fly very speedily, he was in less than a minute by her side.

"My angel—my charmer!" he exclaimed, seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips: "wherefore did you endeavour to avoid me?"

"Oh! because this is madness—perfect madness—to scale the wall," she answered, with an appearance of mingled alarm and anger. "Besides, for what do you take me—or what can you think of me, that you adopt such means to seek my presence?"

"I take you for what you are," was the gentlemen's response, as he still retained her hand in his own,—"one of the loveliest of your sex! And I have ventured to watch until you came for your wonted evening walk in the garden, so that I might seek this opportunity of throwing myself at your feet and declaring how much I love you. Oh! wherefore be thus cruel!" he exclaimed, as Emma endeavoured—or at least affected the endeavour—to extricate herself from the half-embrace in which he now held her.

"Unhand me, sir," she said; "and if you wish that proper explanations should pass between us, I am willing to grant you an opportunity for a few minutes——"

"Thanks—ten thousand thanks, dearest lady!" exclaimed the gentleman. "That is all I require!"—then conducting her to a seat in a bower of roses, he said as he still retained her hand in his own, "To see you is to admire you—to know you is to love you: but, Ah! to be possessed of your love in return were a happiness beyond description! When first I beheld you—you remember it well—it was two months ago in the Cathedral at Milan—I was instantaneously smitten with the power of your charms. Seizing the opportunity to explain the subject of some painting which you were regarding at the time, I introduced myself to your notice——"

"Think you, sir, that I do not recollect the incident full well?" asked Emma. "I am no prude—there is no ridiculous affectation about me—and I not only remember how we first met at Milan, but likewise how you have since followed me from place to place, until I arrived here with her Royal Highness three weeks ago."

"But you cannot say, Miss Owen," exclaimed the gentleman, "that there has been anything rude, uncourteous, or obtrusive in my conduct? Never have I ventured to accost you save when I observed that you were alone: never have I attempted to force myself upon your attention when you have been in attendance on her Royal Highness, or in company of the other ladies of her household."

"I am free to confess," said Emma, with one of those arch smiles which she knew so well how to assume, and which rendered her so truly bewitching—so dangerously captivating—"I am free to confess that every word you are now uttering is truth itself. So far from accosting me when I have been with others, you have invariably watched your opportunity to catch me when alone. If at Milan or at Turin I merely went out unattended, the length of a couple of streets to purchase an article at a shop, you were immediately at my side——"

"Yes, dear young lady," interrupted her companion,—"to offer you my arm — to protect you against insult—defend you against danger——"

"Yes—and also to whisper certain love-nonsense in mine ears," continued Emma, with a gay laugh and a mischievous look. "And it has been the same since we arrived at Geneva: whenever I have happened to be alone, behold the opportunity for your appearance! The day before yesterday, for instance, it was on yonder heights—last evening it was during a stroll along the shore of the lake—and now, when anxious to escape from the heated dinner-saloon and enjoy the fresh air of the garden——"

"Your tormentor again rushes into your presence," said her companion, with a smile irradiating his really very handsome countenance and showing his fine teeth.

"Yes—but in order to rush into my presence he scales a wall," exclaimed Emma, with an arch look which showed how very far she was from being angry.

"My angel—my adored one—for such indeed you are," exclaimed the gentleman, "can you look me in the face and declare that my presence here in this garden was altogether unexpected on the present occasion? When we parted yesterday on the shore of the lake, I ventured to express a wish and a hope that you would grant me another interview as speedily as possible: and then, with your own pretty mouth and in the melodious cadences of your sweet voice, did you hint the probability that you would be walking in the garden this evening. Thereupon I avowed my intention of laying in wait thus to catch you; and I do not recollect at the time that you gave utterance to anything in the shape of a negative."

"Because I could scarcely believe it possible that you would have the presumption thus to introduce yourself within the precincts of her Royal Highness's dwelling:"—and as Emma thus spoke she again looked with a certain mischievous archness in her companion's face.

"You provoking creature," he exclaimed, flinging his arms about her neck and straining her to his breast: nor did she withdraw her lips from the

close pressure of his own. "There!—now I have punished you in a befitting way for the manner in which you have been talking to me. But after all, you do not seem to fancy that I am absolutely hideous?"

"Oh! what conceit on your part," exclaimed Emma: then as one of her beautiful white hands played almost involuntarily as it were with the light curling hair of her companion,—who, by the bye, was tall, slender, well-made, and good-looking,—she said, "I certainly do not consider you particularly ugly; and it is perhaps because your personal appearance is so much in your favour that I—like a silly, weak-minded girl as I am—have allowed myself to be inveigled into a kind of romantic friendship for you——"

"Oh! then you admit this much?" exclaimed her companion, with one arm thrown about her waist and his left hand clasping hers.

"Well, I have made the admission," she said, smiling with a gay archness; "and I do not wish to recall it. But did we not just now say something about explanations?—and if so, let them commence at once. In the first place, should you really wish this friendship of our's to continue, you will tell me your name: for you can scarcely fail to remember that notwithstanding the numerous occasions on which you have forced yourself as it were upon my presence, you have never once condescended to make me aware who it might be that thus considered me worthy of his persevering attentions."

"True, dearest girl!" exclaimed her companion; "it was most remiss on my part. But will you not pardon me when I assure you that every time I find myself in your presence, I become so absorbed in the contemplation of your charms and drinking in the melody of your sweet voice, that I totally forget everything connected with myself. But now you remind me that I have indeed been most remiss; and I would not for the world have you imagine that

I purposely studied the slightest concealment towards you."

"Doubtless, then," said Emma, "this long preface will herald the revelation of your name?"

"Have you ever heard of Colonel Malpas?" inquired her companion, with a transitory look of uneasiness as to the impression that his words might make upon the young lady.

"Yes," she exclaimed: "I have assuredly heard of him as one of the gay companions of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. But for the last six months I have been away from England, and therefore unacquainted with all that has been going on in the fashionable world at home. But are you Colonel Malpas?"

"I am," replied this gentleman, well pleased to hear that his fair companion was so much in the dark as to home occurrences.

And here we may observe that the Colonel had shaved off his moustache; and with his countenance slightly browned by the warmth of the sunny south, he had lost that air of a drawing-room officer which was wont to distinguish him. He had moreover to a certain extent got rid of the affected drawl in his voice; and thus, possessing a very handsome person and elegant manners, he was but too well calculated to make an impression upon any young female who was either tenderly sensitive or else fervidly licentious. Of this latter description was Emma Owen: and thus was it that the assiduities of Colonel Malpas had from the very first proved so welcome to her, that she had already made up her mind that if he should prove bold and daring the resistance she might offer would not be of too desperate a character. Besides, Emma had another reason for encouraging the Colonel—a reason altogether unconnected with her own sensual passions, but having reference to the part which she had to perform in carrying out the views of the conspirators against her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales.

"And you are Colonel Malpas?" she said, gazing with a kind of subdued tenderness upon her companion: then, as a sudden idea seemed to strike her, she said with altering voice and overclouding look, "But if I mistake not, I have heard of a Mrs. Malpas—and therefore you are married?"

"Yes—unfortunately I am," answered the Colonel, who was playing his own part quite as well as Emma enacted hers: and calling to his aid the most impassioned air he could possibly assume, he said, "Yes—'tis true—alas! too true—that I am married. But married to whom? To one who never possessed my heart, and who never loved me. It was for her gold that I offered her my hand: it was for my social position she accepted it. A union, begun in selfishness, could not end in love. But I need not dwell upon this unhappy marriage of mine: suffice it to say, that I am separated from my wife. She has returned to her friends—and I am as it were my own master once again. Sated for the time with the pleasures and enjoyments of the fashionable world, I have come to wander upon the Continent for change of scene and variety of recreation. But little did I think that this visit of mine to southern Europe would turn the very spring tide of my life into a new channel!—little did I think that I was destined to meet one whose image has become indelibly stamped upon my heart! O dearest Emma, hitherto there has been much lively discourse between us—much jocularity and *badinage;*—and indeed your archness is so amiable, and your most mischievous looks are so often the most seductive as they are ever the most killing, that it were a pity to implore you to be serious. But serious we must nevertheless be, while I declare solemnly and sacredly that I love you!"

"But you are married—you are married?" exclaimed Emma, deeming it right to affect a temporary prudery, because a too speedy surrender under the circumstances would, she thought, stamp her character with unpardonable levity in the estimation of her companion: but still, though she seemed to give vent to that ejaculation with a kind of inward anguish, she didnot with draw herself from the half-embrace in which the Colonel retained her.

"Because I am married, dearest girl," he whispered with all the appearance of deep emotion, "it is no reason wherefore I should not love you. You are beautiful—you are fascinating—and I have no power over volition. Would that I could rend asunder the bond which chains me to that destiny of marriage! But I cannot—and while offering you a heart that never loved before, and that will ever be most tenderly devoted and attached, I am unable to say that my hand accompanies it. If you have no love for me in return, you can of course, without a pang and without remorse, abandon me to disappointment and despair. But if you do in the slightest degree reciprocate that passion which I experience, you will sacrifice all and everything to such a feeling."

"What mean you?—what mean you?" asked Emma, whose strong passions were already influenced by that contact in which she was placed with her handsome companion.

"I mean, dearest," he replied, drawing her still more closely towards him, and venturing upon bolder dalliances than he had as yet dared to attempt,—"I mean that if we are to be happy together, you must make up your mind to the omission of that ceremony which society has ordained to be performed in a church, but which nevertheless has no power of binding *hearts*, however indissolubly it may unite *hands*. I mean," continued Malpas, still more plainly developing the detestable but hackneied sophistry of every man who tempts a woman to her undoing,—"I mean, dearest, that you must dispense with the aid of a clergyman to unite us—and that instead of formally and ceremoniously declaring yourself to be mine in the presence of man, you will consent to become so in the view of heaven."

"Oh! what power is there in your words," murmured Emma, growing as it were to his breast against which her bosom rose and fell with voluptuous heavings: yet it was not any magic persuasion in the Colonel's language, but the rising excitement of her own devouring passions, that was now melting her into soft and sensuous yielding.

"Dearest, dearest Emma!" said the Colonel, pressing his lips to hers and experiencing the thrill of ecstacy which was conveyed by the soft ardour of her caresses: then, after a long pause, he said, "To-night, dearest Emma, you must admit me into the villa?"

"Oh! no—no—I dare not!" she murmured, but in a manner which showed that she meant to yield to a little further persuasion.

"Ah! then you do not love me," he exclaimed:

and still he pressed her more closely in his arms, in order to sustain that frenzy of the passions which he saw was influencing her and which made her whole frame tremble and vibrate.

"It is cruel of you thus to accuse me," she said, nestling still closer if possible in his embrace: and as through the arbour of roses her countenance caught the last beams of the setting sun, its expression was that of a languor so softly sensuous, so bewitchingly wanton, that Malpas was encouraged to seek the crowning bliss then and there.

But as he thus sought to make her entirely his own, a scintillation of prudence flashed up in Emma's mind, even amidst the delicious agitation of those desires which were well nigh indomitable; and suddenly recollecting that this was the hour when the Princess and the ladies of her suite were wont to walk in the gardens, she so far resisted the present daring endeavours of the Colonel as to promise that if he would leave her now he should receive admission to her chamber at a later hour when night drew her veil upon the scene. Then, in low soft whispers,—interrupted by frequent kisses, both given and received,—did Emma explain to her lover how he was to proceed between eleven and twelve that night in order to gain her room without fear of observation.

They then separated—Colonel Malpas once more scaling the wall of the enclosure, and Emma Owen taking two or three turns up and down a secluded gravel walk, in order to regain her composure ere she joined the Princess and her suite in their evening stroll through the gardens.

CHAPTER CXXIV.

THE SECRET EXPEDITION.

In the wall at the back part of the spacious grounds belonging to the villa, was a door opening upon a narrow road, which led for about a quarter of a mile through some fields stretching up to the verge of the city of Geneva; and it was about half-past ten o'clock, on the same evening of which we have been writing, that two female figures stole forth from that garden door.

The silver moon rode high in the heavens, attended by countless myriads of stars—like a virgin-queen with her courtly galaxy of maidens; but a chill breeze, coming from the mountains and passing over the immense lake, would have been of itself a sufficient reason to explain wherefore those two females were so well muffled up in ample cloaks. It was, however, no reason wherefore they should be so carefully veiled, and why on issuing forth they should cast such quick and anxious glances around, as if fearful of being observed. Indeed, it was evident enough that they had now quitted the villa for no ordinary purpose of enjoying a ramble in the silence, the moonlight, and the loneliness of that hour; but they had some secret and important business on hand.

"The coast is clear, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger—for she indeed was one of the females thus cloaked and veiled, and the eldest Miss Owen was the other. "Come—let us be quick. But your eyes are better than mine: do you see anybody approaching?"

"No—not a soul," answered Agatha. "But stop one moment: I must lock the gate, and take the key with me. Heavens! how my hand trembles. I positively feel as if I were about to commit some heinous crime."

"'Tis cold—'tis the night air," said Mrs. Ranger. "You must not give way to idle fears or gloomy presentiments——"

"But you tell me," said Agatha, whose teeth chattered audibly, "that the house to which we are going is situated in one of the most secluded quarters of Geneva——"

"The terror implied by this remark is foolish, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger. "No one will molest us—there is no danger. The police regulations of Geneva are excellent, and crime is scarcely heard of. Besides, if I am courageous enough to venture thus by night into a lonely quarter for *your* sake, surely you can conquer this repugnance——"

"Pardon me, my dear friend," said Agatha: "for a good friend indeed have you been to me! Without your aid and advice, I should never have been able thus to have concealed my position——"

"Oh, it is simple and easy enough!" answered Mrs. Ranger, as she and Agatha proceeded along the narrow road together, in the direction of Geneva. "I do not mind telling you, my dear girl, that I have had some little experience in these matters in my lifetime; and more than one young lady of high birth, rank, and title, has been indebted to me for concealing her shame——I beg your pardon, my dear, I did not mean any imputation—concealing her position, I meant, until almost within a week or two of the crisis. I was once companion to a widow-lady of high rank, who had an only daughter—a very beautiful girl, but the strength of whose passions was insuperable. She was engaged to be married to a young nobleman temporarily absent in the colonies; but in the meantime she could not resist the temptation of intriguing with a youthful foot-page in the household. Dear me!" continued Mrs. Ranger, "he was quite a boy—not more than seventeen or eighteen; but nevertheless the result was that the young lady found herself in a way to become a mother. I soon penetrated her secret; and she gratefully gave me her confidence. Fortunate for her was it that she did so: for I enabled her to conceal her position up to within two days of her confinement. Then she quitted home upon some excuse already arranged—and returned in a fortnight, looking a *leetle* delicate and interesting, it is true, but without an appearance to excite her mother's suspicion as to what had happened. Three months afterwards the young nobleman came home—they were married—and at the present moment they are as happy as the day is long."

"And what became of the child?" asked Agatha, with no mere passing interest in the question, because the subject came very nearly and somewhat painfully home to her own feelings.

"Oh! the child," observed Mrs. Ranger, carelessly: "a gipsy-woman consented to adopt it on condition of receiving fifty pounds——"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Miss Owen, with a shudder, which now arose from a tremor at the heart's core, and not from the influence of the night air: "Is it possible that the young mother could have shown such heartlessness?"

"Where was the alternative, my dear?" asked

Mrs. Ranger with all the cool unconcern of one who was hardened in iniquity. "It was not likely that I, as the young lady's adviser and confidante, should have allowed a chance of that child sooner or later discovering the secret of its birth, and becoming in the hands of unprincipled persons a means of extortion——"

"But in this present case, my dear madam," said Agatha, grasping Mrs. Ranger with convulsive violence by the arm, as they continued their way along the lonely road: "in this present case——"

"What do you mean?—in *your* case?" asked Mrs. Ranger. "There! I nearly slipped over a stone! Dear me! what a wretched road! But look, Agatha—from this point how beautiful appears the lake at a distance! Does it not seem like an inland sea?"

"My dear Mrs. Ranger," cried the young lady, "do for heaven's sake talk to me upon the subject that is now uppermost in my thoughts! Pray do not show such callousness. I am entirely in your hands—entirely at your mercy. I have submitted to your advice in all things——"

"Well, my love—and have I not given you the best possible counsel? Here you are, near the end of your eighth month—and your appearance is such as to preclude the possibility of suspicion. Besides myself and your sister Emma, not a soul is acquainted with your secret."

"Yes—Julia has discovered it," observed Agatha.

"Well, I suppose it was your own fault," exclaimed Mrs. Ranger: "and if she discovered it, it was because you must have allowed her to do so?"

"Oh! certainly," said Agatha; "and I rather wished her to know it. At first I had concealed my position from her because I did not think her ideas were *quite* so far advanced as those of Emma. But after the description which she gave us of the artifices and stratagems she practised, under the guise of *Laura Linden*, upon the self-styled Jocelyn Loftus, I did not think it necessary to have any secrets from her."

"And you were right," observed Mrs. Ranger. "But there is prudence in being cautious and guarded at first. For instance, your mother and yourselves were quite right in not initiating me fully, at the commencement, into the real object of your appointments about the person of the Princess. But as circumstances developed themselves and it became necessary for me to know every thing, you see how useful I have been."

"Useful indeed!" exclaimed Agatha: "but to me especially have your services been valuable. Ah! a few months ago, when it first struck me that my amour with the Prince Regent would not be without certain consequences, I treated the matter lightly enough; and I remember laughing over it with Emma in Paris. But as time wore on, the affair seemed to acquire a certain degree of seriousness——"

"Such things are always serious with young girls who are in their first scrape," said Mrs. Ranger. "I dare say it will go the round with your two sisters. Here is Emma with some unknown lover dangling at her heels—and Julia with the Earl of Curzon making fierce and violent love to her, also on the sly——But, by the bye, has Emma yet learnt the name of her inamorato?"

"No—I think not yet," answered Agatha impatiently. "She told me something about it this evening; but I had not time to listen to her then—and we therefore postponed the conversation. But pray, my dear Mrs. Ranger, do let me bring your mind back to the question which I asked you ere now——"

"Ah! I recollect," exclaimed the woman who was not only a Hecate of iniquity, but was as heartless as she was vile. "You were talking to me about the expected babe—*your* babe—and you really seemed as if you already experienced some of that maudlin, mawkish, sickly feeling which reads all very pretty in romances and novels, and which is called the prompting of maternal instincts: but let me tell you there is very little of it in the fashionable world——"

"Nevertheless," observed Agatha, with a sort of gasping of the breath, "I must candidly admit that I *do* feel much more than I ever thought I should;—and though of course anxious—yes, deeply, profoundly anxious—to get through this painful ordeal as tranquilly as possible, and without suspicion—much less exposure—I cannot altogether divest myself of a yearning to acquire the assurance that the innocent offspring of this amour will not be altogether abandoned—deserted—uncared for——"

"Don't be alarmed, Agatha—and don't be childish," interrupted Mrs. Ranger. "Am I not about to introduce you to the worthy doctor whom I have selected to conduct this business throughout?—and will you not now have an opportunity of learning from his lips what kind of an arrangement I have made? You ought rather to lavish thanks upon me, than convey anything like a remonstrance or reproach, even by implication. Think you, my dear, that I found out Dr. Maravelli without trouble, and without a considerable exercise of that ingenuity wherein I may be said to excel? As a matter of course—dwelling as I am under the roof of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales—I could not go about openly and publicly asking after a discreet doctor who would engage to do certain services on specific conditions. Had I been thus imprudent, all Geneva would have rung with the scandal by this time, and the common report would be that one of her Royal Highness's ladies was in a way that rendered the services of an accoucheur shortly needful. No—no, my dear girl," continued the vain, conceited, and garrulous Mrs. Ranger; "I do not commit myself in so silly a manner. I knew the value of caution and prudence in this affair as well as in any other that I ever undertook. Accordingly, it was only by dint of cunning inquiries, stealthily pursued—catching a hint in one quarter and following it up in another—then pursuing the subject elsewhere—and so on,—it was only, I say, by these means that I at length obtained the information I sought: namely, the abode of a doctor who is sufficiently clever to be trusted in respect to his skill and sufficiently discreet to be trusted in respect to his honour. Moreover, it was necessary that he should be sufficiently ductile and tractable to induce him to submit to any conditions without asking a single question—and sufficiently needy or else avaricious to induce him to enter heart and soul into the entire business for the sake of the handsome reward held out. Such was the man I had to find—I, a comparative stranger at Geneva! Nevertheless—aided by my perfect knowledge of the tongue, guided by my discretion, and encouraged by my innate spirit

of perseverance—I succeeded;—and in Dr. Maravelli are comprised all the qualifications which I have enumerated. Indeed he is a most valuable personage——But here we are at the entrance of the lane leading to his house."

"Lane indeed!" murmured Agatha, recoiling for a moment in alarm from the deep shade of the dismal, narrow, cut-throat looking street, or rather alley, the mouth of which they had just reached.

For while Mrs. Ranger was delivering herself of the long harangue which we have just recorded, she and her young companion had threaded the fields in safety and now reached the city: but so narrow was the alley into which Mrs. Ranger was about to lead the way, that no ray of the pure cold moonlight could penetrate down into the darkness of its shades.

"Good heavens, Agatha!" said Mrs. Ranger, perceiving that her companion stopped short: "what are you afraid of?"

"Afraid!" responded Miss Owen, her teeth again chattering audibly: "'tis enough to make any one afraid to think of penetrating into this dreadful neighbourhood where there is not a lamp to light the street—no, nor even a candle flickering from a window. And talking of being afraid, how is it that you, whom I have seen at times so nervous—especially about robbers when we have been travelling——"

"Nervousness, my dear, is a fashionable luxury to which I give way either as a pastime for myself," responded Mrs. Ranger, "or else as a means of making other people uncomfortable when I see them *too* happy. But I can put off my nervousness just as easily as I can a gala-dress when the particular occasion for wearing it is over. Indeed, I can always pump up my courage to a degree commensurate with circumstances. And now, Agatha, are you going to be outdone by me in respect to presence of mind?"

"But this street—or rather this lane," said Agatha, still hanging back, "is so dark, it seems as if we were about to plunge into some unknown cavern."

"Oh! nonsense—you have been reading some dreadful romance. I have been here before more than once, to see Dr. Maravelli, and already know every inch of the way."

Miss Owen could make no farther remonstrance, and accordingly suffered herself to be led onward into the pitch-dark lane by Mrs. Ranger. But still she walked as if every moment expecting either to fall into some yawning gulf, or to be seized upon by some hand thrust forth from the houses which they were skirting: for the truth is that Agatha, though really lacking not the average amount of feminine courage, was in the usual nervous and sickly state arising from her condition, and the influence of which was immensely aggravated by the almost killing means she adopted to conceal her position. We have already stated, in an early chapter of this work, that Mrs. Ranger was a perfect mass of counterfeits and frauds in person as well as in mind—a shadow of mere skin and bone—plumped up into goodly proportions by all kinds of succedaneous means and artificial contrivances: and thus a hag who knew so well how to change the outward configuration of her own form, could not possibly have been at a loss to devise means of enabling Agatha to model her shape to temporary circumstances. But as a matter of course the unfortunate girl had to submit to a degree of compression that was in itself a positive crucifixion; and this incessant torture from morning till night had not failed to produce very powerful effects upon her nervous system. Hence the terror with which she was really inspired, and not a tittle of which was assumed, as she threaded the long lane where Mrs. Ranger was now guiding her.

At length they beheld a light feebly glimmering in the distance, and resembling a lamp at the extremity of a long vault.

"That is our destination," said Mrs. Ranger, in an encouraging voice.

But Agatha scarcely felt cheered by the announcement—for the light looked feeble and dim as if burning in the chamber of the dead; and attenuated as the poor young lady's mind was, it cannot be wondered if she experienced all kinds of dread presentiments and supernatural influences stealing over her. It even seemed as if Mrs. Ranger herself were some evil genius leading her to destruction; and the very sounds of their footfalls, gentle though the tread of ladies always is, sounded through the stupendous silence of the night dread and terrible to her ears.

At length, just as Agatha's terrors were so increasing upon her that she felt as if she must cry out, they reached a gateway over which the light was burning in the form of a dull oil lamp that only just rendered the outlines of a sombre-looking house discernible amidst the darkness. The building was not large, but certainly had a most gaol-like appearance; and when the door was opened by an old woman and Agatha was led by Mrs. Ranger into a vestibule, or hall, of dark-coloured wood elaborately carved, it seemed to the young lady as if she were entering the precincts of a church. A chill more icy than any she had this night experienced, struck to the very marrow of her bones; and when a low and deeply-set door opened from the side of the hall, showing a light within as feebly glimmering as the lamp outside, Agatha really fancied that it was the interior of a vault thus suddenly revealed to her. But at the same instant that doorway was darkened by the appearance of a thin, pale, keen-eyed individual, of middle age, and whose black costume denoted the physician. The first glance thrown upon him at once created the impression that he was a clever man, but an unprincipled one—a man who would as soon take a life as save it, and as readily administer a cup of poison as the balm of anodyne, provided the murderous employer's bribe was greater than the victim-patient's fee.

"Walk in, ladies," he said, assuming as courteous a tone as possible, and accompanying it with two or three low bows. "I was expecting you according to appointment. You may retire, Mavolta."

This intimation was addressed to the old woman who had opened the gate, and who now withdrew accordingly—while Agatha, accompanied by Mrs. Ranger, entered the place where the lamp was burning, and which was a little parlour fitted up in a manner so sombre as to wear quite a funeral appearance. The doctor however hastily made a motion as if about to light another lamp: but Mrs. Ranger at once said in a significant tone, "Spare yourself that trouble, sir: did I not charge you

when I last saw you, that if I brought with me a certain lady to-night, you would have only the faintest light burning in the room where you received us?"

"And have I not fulfilled your commands, my unknown but most liberal patroness?" exclaimed the doctor: "and if for a moment I mechanically prepared to light another lamp, it was because your companion seemed to hang back as if afraid of penetrating into the gloomy obscurity of this place."

"Thanks for your kind intention; but it is unnecessary," returned Mrs. Ranger

It now struck Agatha wherefore so feeble a lamp was flickering in the room: it was evidently a precaution insisted upon by Mrs. Ranger, in her previous interviews with the doctor, in order to prevent him from having the slightest chance of penetrating with his eagle eyes through the veils which his visitants wore.

"This, I presume," said Maravelli, pointing towards Agatha, "is the lady concerning whom you, madam," and he turned towards Mrs. Ranger, "have spoken to me?"

"It is so," responded the vile woman thus addressed. "As I have already told you, doctor, my companion is most anxious to assure herself beforehand that every arrangement has been well settled and agreed upon between you and me for the coming event in which she, poor thing! is destined to be the principal actress."

"I am most happy thus to form the acquaintance of one who is to be my patient," said the doctor,—"that is, so far as an acquaintance can be possibly made where the countenance is to remain unseen and the name unknown."

"Those are the conditions," observed Mrs. Ranger; "and I will repeat the rest in my companion's presence to satisfy her mind not only that I have made the various arrangements which I have already explained to her, but that you, doctor, understand those arrangements exactly as I have proposed them."

"Proceed," said Agatha in a low tone: but her fears were now dissipating, and she began to perceive that she had been the prey of unfounded alarms.

"In the first place," resumed Mrs. Ranger, "I have proposed that you, Dr. Maravelli, shall—when the term for this lady's accouchement approaches—hold yourself in readiness to be fetched at a moment's warning to attend upon her—that you will consent to be conducted blindfold to the place of destination—that you will remain blindfold within its walls——"

"Unless," said Maravelli, "the life of the patient should be in a predicament calculated to set aside all considerations of precaution, in which case I must act according to circumstances."

"Precisely so," observed Mrs. Ranger. "But suppose that all goes on well—as we may hope and trust—you will then remain blindfold at the house during the short time your services may be required; and you will come away blindfold afterwards. Moreover, you pledge yourself most solemnly and most sacredly—as a man and as a gentleman—that whatever may transpire, you will avail yourself of no circumstance to obtain a glimpse of this lady's countenance?"

"Agreed!" exclaimed Maravelli: "and since you have already given me a right noble fee in anticipation, and have promised me a future recompense on equally liberal terms, I have no wish to prove treacherous."

"The next portion of our agreement," continued Mrs. Ranger, "is that the child, should it survive——"

"Ah!" interrupted the doctor, his countenance suddenly assuming a look diabolically sinister—"then it is resolved that the child *may* live if it can?"

"Oh! was the contrary ever mooted?" exclaimed Agatha, the horrible comprehension of the man's meaning flashing to her mind.

"Don't be silly, my dear," said Mrs. Ranger impatiently. "Dr. Maravelli has only treated the matter in a business-like point of view. Besides, on the Continent they are not quite so particular as they are in England. It is therefore agreed," she continued, "that if the child lives it is to be brought hither immediately after its birth, by you, doctor—and to be duly entrusted by you to certain persons of good character, though humble means, who will rear the child tenderly and properly. And in consideration thereof, the said persons are to receive twenty-five louis d'or,* annually. Lastly, be it observed that I have already placed in your hands, doctor, a retaining fee of fifty louis d'or; and a farther fee of the same amount is to be paid you on the occasion when your services, which are thus retained, shall have been duly rendered."

"You have stated the case, madam, with the same precision in which I have already agreed to every one of its details. Save and except," continued Dr. Maravelli, "that you have omitted to specify how the annual stipend of twenty-five louis d'or is to be paid for the maintenance of the child."

"Through your own bankers," said Mrs. Ranger; "as you will undertake to keep an eye upon the child—so that should it live and its parents at any time be desirous of claiming it, the wish may be at once gratified by application to you."

"These are the conditions," observed the doctor; "and I on my part consent to them all. I hope that my fair patient, who has listened to this discourse, is satisfied?"—and he turned with a sort of sycophantic courtesy towards Agatha, who liked his manner as little as might be.

But ere she had time to give any answer, a bell was heard to ring in the hall; and the doctor, as if seized with a sudden uneasiness, started from his chair—listened attentively—then sate down again, trying to look composed—and then once more sprang from his seat with increasing restlessness.

"Excuse me for a few minutes," he said. "It is the gate-bell—and I think I can guess——"

Then, without saying any more, he bowed to the two veiled ladies and abruptly quitted the room.

"Something is wrong—I do not like his manner—what can it be?" said Agatha, in a hasty whisper, and now speaking to Mrs. Ranger in English; for all the conversation with the doctor had been carried on in the French language.

"Oh! 'tis nothing," answered Agatha's companion in the same hushed and subdued tone. "You can judge full well, by all he has undertaken

*£20 sterling.

for us, that he is not excessively nice or particular; and it may be he is now receiving some visitors on an errand belonging to the same species, though perhaps not precisely of the same form or fashion as our own."

"Hush!" said Agatha, whose terrors sharpened all her faculties: "there are voices whispering outside—and, Oh! the doctor has left the door ajar! Doubtless 'twas in his agitation—for agitated he assuredly was: and therefore I do not think that it was any ordinary visitor he was expecting, or any detail of his wonted routine of business that he fancied himself called upon to transact. Hush!" again whispered Agatha: and impelled by an irresistible curiosity, she approached the door to listen.

"How can you be so foolish?" exclaimed Mrs. Ranger, who however, somewhat catching the infection of her young companion's fears, rose up from her seat and joined her at the door.

And now both of them listened with suspended breath to catch the slightest word or sound that might reveal the mystery of the doctor's recent agitation, and of the scene—whatever it were—that was now passing in the hall.

"You are full early to-night, Kobolt," said Maravelli, in a voice which, though subdued, nevertheless reached the ears of the two ladies.

"It is not always easy to pick and choose one's own time," answered a rough voice: "and we fishers of men must take home the booty that our nets bring up as soon as caught—or else 'tis apt to turn putrid:"—and the fellow indulged in a coarse chuckle which sounded hideous and ominous through the hall.

"Hush! hush! I have patients *there*," said the doctor. "But whom have you in your company?"

"Hernani the Italian, and Walden the Switzer," was the response, again given in the rough voice which had before spoken and which no doubt belonged to the individual whom the doctor had addressed as Kobolt. "Here they are, getting the *fish* in out of the cart. Come now, dame Mavolta—bring the light nearer. There! down with it upon the floor, comrades—and then you can be off to get the cart away back to the shed. But of course you will mind what answers ye give the police if ye happen to encounter them."

"Aye, aye," replied two other voices—most probably those of Hernani and Walden. "But here's the fish:"—and almost at the same instant Agatha and Mrs. Ranger heard something fall, like a heavy inert mass, upon the stone pavement of the hall; and the sound struck upon their ears dull and ominous, as if it were that of a corpse—making their blood run cold and their limbs tremble.

Fain would they have raised their veils and peeped forth from the parlour-door to clear up the horrible suspicion which had arisen in their minds, and thus relieve themselves of the fearful uncertainty that had seized upon them. But the doctor might return every moment:—he was but a few yards distant on the other side of that door, which they dared not open an inch wider lest it should grate on its hinges and betray their eaves-dropping.

"Now then, comrades, be off!" said the hoarse voice of Kobolt. "I will remain to help the doctor lift his prize to an inner room, and receive the gold pieces. In half-an-hour I will join you at our usual place of meeting."

"All right," responded the two voices which had previously given utterance to brief monosyllables; and the front door was then heard to open and close gently.

"Now be quick," said the doctor in a sharp impatient tone. "Let us clear this away—or those who are waiting for me will begin to consider my absence most extraordinary."

With a still more poignant curiosity and a still keener attention, if possible, did Agatha and Mrs. Ranger continue to listen inside the parlour; and now upon their ears slowly crept a sound as if that same heavy object which they had previously heard thrown down in the hall, was being dragged over the stone floor.

"Be quiet, fool that you are!" said the doctor angrily. "We must lift it, I tell you! That noise can be heard! Lift it, I say!"

And then, as Agatha and Mrs. Ranger staggered back to their seats, overcome by the force of horrible suspicions now reduced almost to a certainty, they heard the quick footsteps of Maravelli and Kobolt retreating along the hall with the peculiar tread of men carrying something awkward and heavy between them. An inner door then opened and shut—and all was still.

"Heavens! what is the meaning of this?" murmured Agatha, who felt as if she were about to faint. "Terrible thoughts are agitating in my brain!"

"Terrible indeed!" said Mrs. Ranger, her whole form shivering with a cold shudder. "But we must compose ourselves—we must collect our courage—we must not let the doctor think we have been spying his actions. There! I will shut the door close!"

Thus speaking, she rose from her seat and secured the door gently:—then hastening back to Agatha's side, she said in a low and rapid voice, "For heaven's sake! subdue your emotions. We must not let him suspect that we have even caught the faintest idea of this scene. Besides, all is settled between him and us—and we will take our departure the moment he returns."

Scarcely had Mrs. Ranger finished speaking, when Maravelli re-entered the parlour; and by the rapid glance which he threw upon his two veiled visitants, it was apparent enough that he sought to ascertain whether they had moved from their seats since he quitted the room. But inasmuch as the dark veils completely concealed their countenances from his view,—and there were no other appearances to cause him to suspect that they were labouring under any peculiar emotion,—the doctor evidently felt re-assured upon the subject.

"Pardon my rudeness, ladies," he immediately said, "in having thus left you alone for even so short a space as five or six minutes. And now permit me to offer some slight refreshment—a glass of wine and a biscuit—which indeed I have already ordered my housekeeper to bring in."

"We thank you, doctor, for your kindness," said Mrs. Ranger, rendering her voice as composed as possible: "but we must take our departure promptly. I do not know that we have anything more to say: the bargain is struck——all the arrangements are well understood——"

"And the most perfect secrecy shall be maintained," added Maravelli. "Permit me, ladies, to light you through the hall."

And officiously throwing open the parlour door, he allowed them to pass forth. But as he followed close behind with the lamp in his hand, the looks of Mrs. Ranger and Agatha, piercing through the thick folds of their veils, were instinctively flung upon the stone floor of the hall; and with a kind of shuddering recoil did they observe a long wet mark upon that pavement near the entrance, as if some bulky object saturated with water had been thrown down and then partially dragged along, and the wet had afterwards been hurriedly mopped up.

Mrs. Ranger felt Agatha stagger against her; but in a quick significant tone she said, "Take my arm, love:"—and the young lady, instantaneously made aware of the necessity of maintaining her presence of mind, shook off as well as she was able the horrible sensations that had suddenly seized upon her. The next moment the front door was opened—the threshold was crossed—and wishing the doctor good night, the two ladies once more emerged into the long dark alley, which now seemed, if possible, more dismal than when they first entered it half-an-hour previously.

It was however a relief unspeakable both to Agatha and Mrs. Ranger to emerge into the fresh air from the atmosphere of the doctor's house, which for the last few minutes of their sojourn there had appeared to be fetid with the odour of the dead;—and they retraced their way to the villa at a pace too rapid to afford opportunity for much connected discourse.

CHAPTER CXXV.

ANOTHER SCENE IN THE GARDEN.

It was about a week after the incidents just related—and again, at the hour of sunset, must we look into the spacious grounds attached to the villa-residence on the outskirt of Geneva. There, in one of the most secluded nooks of the enclosure, shall we behold Miss Julia Owen—the youngest of the three sisters—emerging from a shady avenue and looking hastily up and down the gravel walk which she now entered. Observing that the coast was clear, she continued her way towards a garden-seat placed against the boundary-wall at the extremity of the gravel walk; and flinging herself on the bench, she consulted a watch which she took from her bosom.

"'Tis close upon the hour when he promised to meet me," she murmured to herself. "But wherefore is it that I am thus before the time? Ah! 'tis because I love him—because he is handsome—yes, nobly handsome!"

And then the young lady suddenly gave the rein to her imagination, which was hot and fervid as that of her two elder sisters; and allowing her fancy thus to run riot in conjuring up the joys which she believed might be experienced in the arms of the individual whose image was uppermost in her thoughts, she became the prey to longings as ardent and desires as devouring as those of a Messalina.

Although it was the hour of sunset the heat was stifling: no breeze came from the mountains in the distance, nor ruffled the surface of the lake that lay sleeping tranquilly in its mighty bed. The frenetic fervour of Julia's unruly passions made the blood course with the fury of fever-heat in its crimson channels; and to obtain air she threw off her bonnet and shawl, thus remaining in the elegant evening costume in which she had ere now issued from the dining-room. She felt that her cheeks were flushed—she knew that her eyes were swimming in a wanton languor—and as she bent down her looks she could catch the quick risings and sinkings of her bosom which the low-bodied dress revealed in most luxurious exposure. She therefore knew that at this moment she was beautiful—very beautiful; and wishing to produce a certain impression upon the mind as well as the senses of him whom she was expecting, she murmured between her coral lips, "I wish that he would come!"

Scarcely was the desire thus expressed when the sound of footsteps on the other side of the wall reached her ears; and as she looked up she almost immediately encountered the fine dark eyes of him whose presence she was anxiously awaiting.

Standing upon the stump of a tree on the outer side of the wall, the lover was enabled thus to look over that barrier; and Julia, lightly springing upon the seat, thus raised herself to the same level. Then followed what was so truly natural when a gentleman half scales a wall on one side and a lady does the same on the other: that is to say, their lips met in speedy contact and were glued together in one long delicious kiss.

"Dearest Julia—again am I rendered supremely happy!"

"And I, dearest Charles—am I not happy also?"

These were the first words that they exchanged—and their lips once more grew together, remaining in contact this time even longer than at first.

"May I not leap this wall and join you in the garden?" asked the Earl of Curzon—for he indeed was Julia's admirer.

The look which she flung upon him conveyed the answer even before her lips could frame one; and vaulting lightly over the wall, he stood on the garden seat by her side. Then as they sank down thereon to a sitting posture, he seized her in his arms—strained her with every appearance of the fondest rapture to his breast—and covered her cheeks, her lips, and her brow with kisses.

"When we parted yesterday, my dear Charles," said Julia, at length breaking the silence which had been sealed by such rapturous caresses,—"you told me that you had something most important and most serious to speak to me about; and although I besought you to tell me then what it was you had thus to communicate, you preferred that we should meet expressly for the purpose this evening."

"True, dearest girl!" answered the Earl, with his arm thrown round her slender waist and her head pillowed upon his shoulder, so that her brow rested against his cheek. "Because I wished by such an intimation to prepare your mind for the very serious subject whereon it now becomes necessary that we should discourse."

"Proceed, my dear Charles," said Julia, now gazing up into his countenance: "for I see by your looks that you have no evil intelligence to impart."

"I am not so sure that you will think so, Julia," replied the Earl. "At all events listen."

PENELOPE ARBUTHNOT.

"What! is it indeed so *very* serious?" she exclaimed, now showing signs of uneasiness. "Oh! am I about to waken from a delicious dream—a dream of love——"

"Only to make that dream a reality, if you choose," interrupted Lord Curzon, once more straining her to his breast.

"Oh! with this assurance I am already consoled—I am already happy," exclaimed Julia, lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses, so that he would indeed have been but little experienced in the female character were he not able to comprehend that he had only to seek the crowning bliss when he chose in order to obtain it.

"Two months have now elapsed, my dearest Julia," he resumed as he retained her, all vibrating with desire, in his arms,—"since first we encountered each other. Beneath the glorious sun of Italy—in the peerless city of Milan—did I first meet you: and the moment my eyes singled you out as it were from the midst of the royal retinue, I thought to myself that it would be happiness supreme to win the love of such a bewitching creature as thou! You remember how I subsequently introduced myself—how you repulsed me at first—then how you were led to look more favourably upon me——"

"Yes—because I saw that you were handsome, and that your manners were fascinating," observed Julia in a low tremulous voice. "From the very first moment I was interested in you—but I dared not all on a sudden receive the advances of a stranger. But when you told me who you were and besought me to give you a hearing, did I refuse you?"

"No—I have not the slightest complaint of cruelty to make against you," responded the Earl of Curzon. "On the contrary, in revealing my name, it was reminding you also of the disadvantage under which I laboured in thus addressing a young lady——"

"You mean," observed Julia, with a tender look, "that at the same time you made yourself known to me, it of course occurred to my recollection that there was such a lady as the Countess of Curzon in existence, and that therefore you were married! But even *then*, did I prove cruel? did I repulse you? did I flee from your presence? No. Nevertheless, had I behaved as woman *ought*—not perhaps always as woman *does*—I should have assumed a haughty air and an indignant look, and have demanded by what right you—a married man—dared venture to breathe the language of flattery, when evidently meant as a prelude to the more tender whisperings of love, in the ears of a young lady, unmarried—occupying an honourable post about the person of the Princess of Wales——Oh! in such terms as these should I have addressed you, Charles, had it not been that my heart was smitten by a sentiment which, in its very weakness, was stronger than that of womanly prudence and propriety! But what must you think of me for this conduct on my part?—what can your opinion be of one who has encouraged you to follow her from Italy—through Switzerland—hither to Geneva?"

"What is my opinion?" exclaimed the Earl: "it is that you are adorable, and that I adore you! It is that so much love on your part deserves every possible manifestation of love on mine: it is that inasmuch as you have been prepared to make such sacrifices for me, there is no sacrifice which I ought to hesitate to make for you! For in loving me, you love one who cannot conduct you to the altar: you love one who cannot give you the honoured name of wife! And in loving me, also, you place yourself in a position to preclude an honourable marriage with any other suitor who may present himself. Your love then for me—if you abandon yourself to it entirely—amounts to what the world will call your *ruin:* and therefore, if you are indeed prepared to make these tremendous sacrifices for me, what should not I do for you? You renounce the chance of obtaining a husband who would love, cherish, and protect you—and I therefore must renounce the wife whom I possess. This then is the serious matter concerning which I was so anxious to speak to you. It was to propose that, if you be as sincere as I am—as sincere as I think you—we at once resolve to renounce all the world for each other——"

"Oh! this language pours like a flood of elysian rapture into my heart," exclaimed Julia, in tones of thrilling joyousness. "Yes—for my part I will renounce all and everything for thee:"—and she pressed herself closer to the Earl, as if willing and anxious to abandon herself to him then and there, so as to crown the tender compact.

"Dearest, dearest Julia," he said, lavishing upon her caresses as tender as those which she expended upon him were wanton and provocative: "now you are holding out to me hopes of ineffable bliss. But—" and his voice suddenly sank to a low and mysterious whisper—"it is not merely the sacrifice of your honour, Julia, which is involved in all this: it is the sacrifice of all your future prospects—your family—sisters—friends—position—hopes of aggrandizement——"

"I do not think that I altogether understand you, Charles," said the young lady, now fixing upon him a look of mingled doubt and uneasiness. "Pray explain yourself. Already is suspense amounting to an agony——"

"I mean then, dearest Julia," answered the Earl of Curzon, "that the sacrifice we make for each other must be complete. You must fly away with me from Geneva—you must abandon everybody and everything, in order to be mine wholly—and only mine——"

"What! and live with you openly as your mistress?" exclaimed Julia, astonished but not shocked—amazed but not indignant.

"Most assuredly," responded the Earl. "But you have put my meaning into words more plainly explicit than any I should have ventured to use. It is better however that the matter should thus be placed on a perfectly intelligible footing. I love you, Julia—I have already convinced you that I love you! For the last two months I have followed you from place to place—and in order not to compromise you in any way, or to have it even suspected that I was hanging on the outskirts of the Princess's retinue, as it were, I have submitted to some annoyances and humiliations. Travelling in a humble style—adopting a feigned name—burying myself in an obscure lodging at Geneva—remaining cooped up in that lonely place nearly all day long in order to avoid recognition on the part of any English persons who might happen to be sojourning in the city or passing through it—stealing out only along with the bats and owls of an evening—sometimes fortunate enough to meet you alone—at others compelled to content myself with beholding you at a distance, or else to return home again disappointed at not meeting you at all—in fact, playing a hide-and-seek game in which all the advantages of rank and money are totally absorbed, and a complete barrier raised between myself and every legitimate pleasure and enjoyment, save and except when in your society—and *then* indeed," he added in a softer tone, "am I amply rewarded——"

"Oh! I am aware, dearest Charles, of the sacrifices you have thus made for me," exclaimed Julia: "but you must not blame me if I cannot always either keep an appointment or withdraw myself from immediate attendance upon her Royal Highness——"

"Blame you—no, dearest! I do not blame you," interrupted the Earl. "But what I mean you to understand is, that the sort of life I have lately been leading cannot possibly continue. Though my love is illimitable, my patience is not proportionate. Now then, can you not understand wherefore I said at the beginning of this interview that the topic of our discourse would be a serious one? Indeed the time is come for us to take some decisive step——"

"And that decisive step!" said Julia, gazing upon him with mingled uneasiness and mournful affection.

"I have already explained it to you, my dear girl," answered Curzon. "It is that you will accompany me hence—that you will fly away—resign your position in the household of the Princess—abandon everything for my sake——"

"No, no—I cannot do all this!" exclaimed Julia, with no affected excitement, but with a real feeling of anguish—for she had taught herself to love the Earl of Curzon. "I cannot abandon my post here. For your sake—yes, assuredly I would—heaven

knows I would. But there are other reasons—other considerations——"

And she stopped suddenly short as the wild rapidity of her emotions was about to hurry her upon delicate ground.

"Then you do not love me, Julia, as I love you," exclaimed the Earl. "Farewell—farewell!"

Rising abruptly from the bench, he stooped down—imprinted a kiss upon the forehead of the bewildered girl—and leaping on the back of the seat, vaulted over the wall.

"Farewell—farewell!" he once more exclaimed from the opposite side: and then his retreating steps smote upon Julia's ear.

Now she felt all in an instant that she loved him madly, with a passion which she fancied to be altogether independent of the mere sensuality of desire: and springing upon the garden-seat, she looked over the wall, waving her handkerchief with frantic gestures—for she had presence of mind sufficient to make her aware how dangerous it would be to call after him by name.

He turned his head—he saw her—and he retraced his steps. Another minute—and he was again standing on the stump of the tree on the other side of the wall. Once more too were their hands locked in a warm clasp.

"Could you leave me thus, Charles?" she murmured in a tremulous tone.

"Need I repeat, dear Julia, all that I have said to you this evening?" he asked. "If you love me you will fly hence with me. It is impossible that I can continue this existence of mingled excitement and despondency—light and darkness—bliss in your society, and long hours of loneliness in an obscure lodging—prowling, lurking, and sneaking about like a robber——No, no—I cannot endure it! Say then—will you be mine—wholly mine? or shall we separate at once and for ever?"

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon bent down his head and pressed his lips to Julia's hand; and during the few moments that thus elapsed, a myriad thoughts swept through her brain.

Should she abandon all the dreams of ambition for this love of hers?—should she give up the brilliances of a Court-life for the obscurities of a nobleman's mistress? Should she do a temporary violence to her feelings *now*, by resigning her lover?—or to gratify her passion, should she perhaps plunge into a career of continuous vexations, annoyances, and troubles? Such were the questions that rushed through her mind—worldly thoughts strangely commingling with woman's deepest feelings. But all of a sudden it struck her that the best course would be to gain a delay—and she resolved to make the endeavour.

"Well, Julia, what is your decision?" asked the Earl of Curzon, again raising his head and looking her anxiously in the face.

"There must be mutual concessions," she answered: then bending down her eyes and with a blush of soft sensuousness rising to her cheeks, she murmured, "I am yours now—your wife—your mistress—or whatever title you choose to give me: but you must allow me a short time—say a few weeks—a month at the least—to make certain arrangements here, ere I can possibly leave——"

"Arrangements!—what arrangements can you possibly have to make, Julia?" exclaimed the Earl, with an air of surprise. "I hope that you do not intend to reveal the secret of our love to a living soul?"

"Not for worlds!" answered Julia. "But——I cannot be explicit now—another time perhaps——"

"Julia," said the Earl, in a tone of reproach, "you have secrets from me! Yes—that blush upon your cheek confirms my suspicions——But fool that I am!" he suddenly exclaimed; "what right have I to expect your confidence under present circumstances? Tell me, Julia—if I consent to your proposal—if I agree to prolong my hide-and-seek sojourn in Geneva for another month—will you give me your entire confidence—tell me everything——"

"I will, I will," answered Julia, pressing his hand to her lips. "Oh! now you have made me so happy—so very, very happy!—you have promised to grant me a month ere I leave the Princess for ever to become your mistress openly——"

"And in the meantime," said the Earl, in a subdued voice and with a look so full of wicked meaning that Julia's eyes sank beneath it, though rather to veil the ineffable joy that thrilled through her than from any sense of shame which she experienced,—"in the meantime, dearest, you will grant me the privileges of that love which exists between us and which places us on the same footing as man and wife——"

But we need not extend this chapter to any greater length. Suffice it to say that in the same way as her sister had done towards Colonel Malpas, did Julia Owen murmuringly breathe the requisite instructions to the Earl of Curzon how to obtain admission to her chamber that night at an hour when there need be no fear of observation.

CHAPTER CXXVI.

THE EARL'S LODGING.

It was yet dark, but fast verging towards the dawn, when the Earl of Curzon stole forth from the villa, and hastily threading the garden scaled the wall at the very spot where the bench was so conveniently situated within, and the stump of the tree so suitably placed without. On thus stealthily quitting the grounds, he skirted the wall for some short distance with a view to gain that bye-road which led through the fields to Geneva, and which Mrs. Ranger and Agatha took on the night of their visit to Dr. Maravelli.

But just as he reached that road, the morning broke suddenly above the eastern heights; and the orient heaven became all in a moment so beautifully streaked with orange, and purple, and crimson, and gold, that the Earl paused to survey the spectacle. And so glorious was it that it even chased from his mind the pleasing sensations which a night of rapture in Julia's arms had left behind. All in a sudden, however, his admiring reverie was interrupted by the opening of the private door in the wall looking upon the narrow road. A tall individual, wearing a cloak, issued forth; and the Earl, throwing upon him a rapid sidelong look, was about to hurry away when the glimpse which he thus caught of that person's features made him gaze again more scrutinizingly still: then startled with astonishment, he ejaculated within himself

"By heaven! 'tis Malpas—or I never saw him before in all my life!"

Again the Earl looked—and this third survey convinced him that it was indeed the Colonel, although divested of his moustache and looking stouter and better than he had ever seemed before. And Malpas it assuredly was, as the reader may easily suppose: nor was his astonishment less at thus beholding the Earl than was the Earl's on recognizing him. It was evident that Malpas, taken too much by surprise to hasten off in the first instance or conceal his face in the collar of his cloak, was now irresolute what course to adopt—whether to accost the Earl or to beat a retreat,—while on the other hand, Curzon himself was equally undecided what line of conduct to pursue.

With all his faults—and the reader knows they are many—Curzon entertained a boundless contempt for the paltry and rascally conduct which Malpas had shown in his endeavour to obtain the six thousand guineas wagered at the memorable "banquet of six." Moreover, he beheld in Malpas the paramour of his wife—the author of that dishonour which he felt so keenly, but of which he had no positive proof. Without recapitulating causes, however, suffice it to say that for many reasons the Earl of Curzon hated and detested Colonel Malpas; and under ordinary circumstances he would either have passed him by with supreme contempt, or else have picked a quarrel with him for the purpose of avenging the sense of dishonouring wrong that rankled in his heart. All this, however, would have been very well in London, where it was quite natural for the Earl and the Colonel to meet a dozen times in a week: but here—in such a far distant place as the city of Geneva—it was altogether another thing. Besides, Colonel Malpas had just issued stealthily forth from the villa; and Curzon was seized with an irresistible curiosity to penetrate not only into the cause of Malpas's presence at Geneva, but more especially of his evident intimacy at the residence of the Princess of Wales.

"Can it be possible that his mission is the same as mine, and springing from the same authority?" murmured the Earl hastily to himself: and without any farther hesitation, he at once accosted the Colonel saying, "It would be useless to pretend not to recognise each other."

"Well, now I receive the confirmation of a suspicion," ejaculated Malpas.

"And what is that suspicion?" demanded Curzon in surprise.

"That I have once or twice seen you from a distance lurking about the villa ——"

"Ah! then *you* must also have been lurking about this same villa," interrupted the Earl. "Come —I see that it is better you and I should have some little explanation with each other. At all events, let us not be seen loitering here now, since the day is dawning grandly. Does your road lie towards Geneva?"

"It does," responded Malpas: but he hesitated for a moment, and looked uneasily towards the garden door from which he had just issued.

"I see what you mean," exclaimed the Earl, instantly comprehending the cause of the Colonel's confusion: "the key which gave you egress is still in your hand, and you have something to do with it. Come—do not mind me: place it according to any previous understanding that may have existed between yourself and the lady who lent it to you."

The Colonel laughed significantly, as he observed, "Perhaps the good luck which you have experienced induces you to suspect the nature of mine—and may be you also have just issued from the villa, though by means of some other mode of egress?"

"Put by the key," said the Earl somewhat impatiently; "and we will talk of these matters anon."

Colonel Malpas accordingly, and without any farther hesitation, now deposited the key under the door; and having done this, he accompanied the Earl away from the vicinage of the villa.

"Will it not appear strange," said Curzon suddenly, when they had got to a little distance along the road through the fields, "if you and I are seen entering Geneva together at such an unseemly hour? Perhaps you will come at eight o'clock and breakfast with me: we can then talk over such matters as we may choose to introduce upon the *tapis*."

"Be it so," said Colonel Malpas. "The police are vigilant and strict——"

"Yes—and especially as I happen to be living here under a false name——"

"'Tis exactly the same with myself!" cried Malpas.

"Then all the better reason wherefore we should avoid any unnecessary discussions with the police," observed Curzon,—"especially as the Syndics are very severe towards all foreigners having false passports. I am passing under the common and euphonious name of *Mr. Smith;* and here is the card of my address. You can join me there at eight o'clock."

"Punctually," rejoined Malpas: "and when your servant announces *Mr. Thompson*, you may know that it means me."

They then separated—the Earl of Curzon diverging across the fields, and Colonel Malpas continuing his way along the road. And here we may observe that it was only with a sort of cool politeness, and not with the familiarity of former times, that his lordship had demeaned himself towards the Colonel, who on the other hand was so rejoiced to find that he was not "cut" by one of the most aristocratic of his old acquaintances, that he would not for a moment perceive there was anything at all reserved or distant in the nobleman's manner.

But we shall now follow the Earl of Curzon. In ten minutes he entered Geneva; and striking into a neighbourhood which if not exactly low, at all events was very far from being one of the most aristocratic quarters, he presently knocked at the door of a house of plain and decent appearance. After being kept waiting for some time—the inmates of the dwelling not being up, as it was still very early in the morning—the nobleman was admitted by a pretty-looking and mischievous-eyed Genevese girl of about eighteen, and who had just hurried on a sufficiency of raiment to develop rather than to conceal the symmetry of her charming form. The Earl cast upon her a look of sly meaning, thereby proving that they were not altogether the worst friends in the world; and mutter-

ing something about having been kept up all night in attendance upon a sick friend, he passed into a small but neatly furnished parlour, which, together with a still smaller but equally cleanly bedroom at the back, constituted his lodging.

Having given the pretty Genevese some hurried commands relative to preparations for breakfast at eight o'clock, and also with regard to the prompt admission of a certain *Mr. Thompson* when he should call, his lordship (who, be it remembered, was plain *Mr. Smith* at this lodging) proceeded to refresh himself with his wonted ablutions and perform his morning toilette. Meanwhile he revolved in his mind the manner in which he ought to proceed towards Malpas and the extent to which it would be prudent to confide in him: but he found, upon reflection, that these were points which must be left to the dictation of circumstances, and would materially depend upon the amount of knowledge which the Colonel himself possessed with regard to the business in which he was engaged on the Continent.

Punctually at eight o'clock did Malpas make his appearance;—and as he entered the Earl's neat little parlour, he exclaimed, "Ah! I can understand the attraction which has fixed you at this humble tenement. By heaven! such a pair of bright eyes—such coral lips—such pearly teeth—and such a roguish smile——"

"Hush!" said Curzon: "the girl understands a little English. But come—sit down," he continued, in a somewhat more friendly tone than he had adopted ere now; "and if your appetite be as good as mine, you cannot fail to do justice to this admirable specimen of a Swiss breakfast."

"My morning's walk has indeed sharpened my appetite," said Malpas, as he seated himself at the table; "and really—humble though your lodging be—the service of the board is conducted in a superior style."

The nobleman and his guest now proceeded to do ample justice to the cutlets, the fresh eggs, the fish, the rolls, and the coffee;—and when the repast was concluded, the Earl said, "Now, Malpas, we will have a little serious conversation, if you please."

"I think it is highly necessary, after the singularity of our encounter this morning at sunrise," observed the Colonel.

"But let us begin with a complete and thorough understanding of the principles on which it is to be conducted," resumed the Earl. "I mean to say—shall we throw off all reserve and give each other our entire confidence?"

"I scarcely know how to answer that question," replied Malpas, looking at the Earl in a peculiar manner. "Do you mean with regard to this morning's adventure?"

"I mean with regard to everything," replied the Earl: "not only what we were both doing at the villa this morning, but what we are doing at Geneva at all."

"Then you must suspect something?" said Malpas, determined to proceed guardedly, in case the Earl should have merely been delegated by a *certain person* in London to put his (the Colonel's) trustworthiness and fidelity to the test.

"Yes—I *do* suspect something," responded Curzon, with a significant look: "and this is that you and I are both engaged in the same mission, although perhaps we were not aware of each other's connexion with the business until this morning."

"You have spoken exactly my sentiments," said Malpas.

"Shall we then give each other our confidence?" asked Lord Curzon.

"I have no objection—provided you can show me that I am safe in doing so——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl: "I understand you. On embarking in this enterprise you pledged yourself to secrecy——"

"Just so," rejoined Malpas: "and it is that secrecy which I am now afraid of violating."

"Perdition!" exclaimed the Earl, petulantly. "I was not aware that you were such a stickler for principle! But come—this fencing with each other is a mere idle waste of time," continued Lord Curzon, suddenly adopting a milder tone: "for we are sure to come to the point at last. I also have pledged myself to secrecy in this matter; and therefore whatever amount of confidence we may show each other, we are alike guilty of breach of faith towards our employer—alike incur the same chance of that employer's displeasure—and alike stand the same risk of being betrayed by the other."

"True!" said Malpas: "and therefore let us advance by equal steps along the road of explanations, so that we shall soon ascertain whether we keep pace with each other in the details of the knowledge which we may each possess relative to the nature, aim, and object of our present missions."

"Your proposition is a reasonable one," said the Earl of Curzon. "And now, by way of making a start, I will confess that the employer to whom I have alluded is Lady Sackville."

"Mine also," responded Malpas: "and when I undertook the mission, her ladyship enjoined me to observe the strictest secrecy concerning it to whomsoever I might meet abroad, and likewise to shun as much as possible any of my English acquaintances whom I might chance to encounter."

"The same instructions were given to me," resumed Curzon, "coupled with the earnest recommendation to carry on all my proceedings with the stealthiness of a spy and the secrecy of a bravo—to prefer lurkings and watchings by night to any espials by day—to take a feigned name—preserve a strict *incognito*—live humbly and lodge obscurely, so as to avoid attracting especial notice—and carefully refrain from communication with any one who, being in a position to recognise me, might mention the fact on writing to friends in England."

"All these tally perfectly with my instructions," observed Malpas. "The object of this mission of mine is a most delicate one. I set out from England with orders to repair to the south of Europe—ascertain where her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was residing at the time—and by some means or other form an acquaintance with one of three young ladies——"

"The Misses Owen," added Curzon. "My instructions were precisely the same. I had already heard something of that Owen family, although personally unacquainted with either of the ladies; and I was not altogether surprised when Lady Sackville assured me that these three sisters are anything but patterns of virtue. Her ladyship accordingly led me to expect that I should probably experience but little difficulty in forming an intimate acquaint-

ance with one of them, whichever it were that accident might first throw in my way——"

"All these representations were likewise made to me," interrupted Malpas: "and indeed, I have found that every syllable Lady Sackville uttered relative to the Owens—that is to say, judging by the beautiful Emma——"

"And I, judging by the tender and somewhat sentimental Julia," observed the nobleman, "in whose arms I experienced elysian raptures during the past night——"

"Then were we close neighbours," continued Malpas: "for Emma told me that her room was next to Julia's—and in Emma's arms have I been sleeping for the last seven nights."

"I know not how you fared with your Emma," resumed the Earl of Curzon; "but I am afraid that I shall have some difficulty in bending Miss Julia to my purposes."

"My instructions were to some extent of a twofold character," observed Malpas, taking up the thread of the discourse in his turn. "Lady Sackville directed me either to insinuate myself completely into the confidence of one of these Owen girls—glean from her all the secret proceedings of herself and sisters—and frustrate to the best of my endeavour those designs which should militate against the welfare and interests of the Princess of Wales——"

"Or else," resumed the Earl, "if you could not succeed in winning the confidence of one of the Miss Owens, you were to take a bold and desperate step towards your fair one—I mean nothing less than persuading her to elope with you."

"True!" ejaculated Malpas: "those were precisely the instructions which I received from Lady Sackville—and it is easy to comprehend that your's were exactly the same. But for my part I have made but little progress with Miss Emma in any other matter than that of love. In amorous play and wanton sport she is proficient enough: nor indeed am I the first tutor the benefit of whose training she has enjoyed in that respect. On the contrary, the true pattern of a Court beauty is she—all wickedness and no virtue—a Maid of Honour in name only—a perfect demirep even at her tender age——"

"I cannot give my Julia a much better character," remarked the Earl of Curzon; "save and except that I must do the girl credit for the endeavour to conceal her natural wantonness as much as possible. Besides, I really do believe that she loves me; and to tell you the truth, I entertain something more than a mere transient passion for her. Not that I actually love her in the true sense of the word; but I like her, and should be by no means sorry to have her as a mistress for six months or so. But until yesterday I could never even contrive to give the conversation such a turn as to make her admit that she had certain secrets which she kept from me; and from her manner I am afraid that I shall have much trouble in extracting any revelations at all. I have proposed that she shall elope with me: but she has insisted upon a month's delay."

"As for Emma—when I ventured to speak to her about her position in the Princess's household," resumed Malpas, "with the hope of drawing her into a conversation upon the subject, she has always avoided the discourse in some mischievously mirthful manner: and when I have proposed, since we have grown *particularly* intimate during the past week, that she should fly away with me, she has burst out laughing in my face, with an inquiry why we cannot be just as happy in each other's arms beneath the roof of the villa as in any dwelling-place to which I might propose to transport her? Thus stands the affair with me: and after more than three months' absence from England, during which I have been for upwards of nine weeks dancing attendance on Miss Emma, the real and actual business of my mission remains just where it was."

"And I am bound to make precisely the same admission," observed the Earl. "Now it is quite clear that Lady Sackville is friendly to the Princess of Wales——"

"No doubt," exclaimed Malpas: "and she is aware of certain covert designs which are entertained against her Royal Highness's peace and comfort. Of those designs it is evident enough that the three Owens are the instruments and agents; and it is either to paralyze their efforts while they are in the Princess's service, or else to remove two of them altogether from the sphere of their mischievous intents, that you and I have been entrusted with our present missions."

"You have put the whole affair in [illegible] shell, so far as explanation goes," remarked the Earl of Curzon; "and it is quite clear that as the business is of the most delicate, peculiar, and even curious nature, Lady Sackville adopted every precaution to prevent you and me from making any revelations to each other or comparing notes on the subject. But there is the third sister Agatha—I wonder whether any steps have been taken towards her——"

"Perhaps not," remarked Malpas: "at all events it may be supposed that Lady Sackville, in laying her plans, calculated that either you or I would be certain to glean the secrets of these sisters through the medium of at least one of them, and thereby frustrate all proceedings in any way hostile to the Princess."

"Or else," remarked the Earl, "Lady Sackville perhaps calculated that if you and I succeeded in persuading two of the sisters to elope with us, the one who was left would be rendered powerless for mischief when deprived of the aid of her sister-accomplices."

"Thus far," said Malpas, "our confessions have advanced concurrently, step by step, on either side. For my part I do not mind adding that when my mission is over, whichever way it may end, I shall look for a handsome reward. Of course if I am to end by persuading Miss Emma to elope with me and become my mistress altogether openly, and avowedly, somebody must furnish me with the means of keeping her: and who is to do this if not the lady at whose instigation I shall incur such an incumbrance?"

"Then I am to understand," remarked Curzon, "that you have had no specific reward promised you? I am in the same position: I have stipulated for nothing, but have left matters to Venetia's generosity. Of course she can obtain every thing she asks for from the Prince; and I do not think that a Marquisate, with some good sinecure of three or four thousand a-year, will be too much for all the anxiety, trouble, and annoyance I am undergoing. As for Julia, it would be necessary

to provide for her hereafter, should she become my mistress openly: and of course Venetia will furnish the means for all this."

Lady Sackville *must* do it," observed Malpas, his lip curling with a peculiar smile of malignant triumph: "for do you not see, Curzon, that she has placed herself entirely in our power? In the course which she is pursuing she is secretly befriending the Princess of Wales; and therefore she is opposing herself to the Prince."

"Yes," exclaimed Curzon: "But I do not suppose that you will find it necessary to use threats or coercion towards Lady Sackville in order to obtain a suitable recompense for your present services. But, by-the-bye, was it she who released you from your little difficulties?—and if so, how on earth did you manage to insinuate yourself again into her favour?"

"Oh! I managed to make my peace with her," exclaimed Malpas, assuming a self-sufficient air. "But as for the way I got out of the King's Bench," he continued, inwardly chuckling at the idea of being asked the question by the husband of the very woman who had transmitted him the means for the purpose,—"that was of course done through my own resources."

"Well, well, we need not wander away from the immediate topic of our discourse," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "From all that has now taken place between us, it is pretty clear that our mission on the Continent is the same—that we are acting according to the instructions of the same employer—and that our pursuits, in fact, have become identical. Perhaps, all things considered, we may further our views by consulting each other, and to a certain extent acting in concert—although of course it must remain a profound secret from everybody that we have thus met. Not a word to Emma on your side—not a word to Julia on mine: and in our communications with Lady Sackville—for I presume you write to her occasionally, as I also do—not a syllable must slip from the pen calculated to betray the circumstance of our meeting and the good understanding which has resulted. In more ways than one we may serve each other's views."

"Assuredly so," responded Malpas, inwardly rejoicing at being thus restored to so friendly a footing with the Earl of Curzon. "And now let us deliberate upon the best manner in which we can proceed, so as to bring the business wherein we are concerned to a speedy issue."

"That is an aim most sincerely to be desired," ejaculated Curzon: "for I am heartily sick of the hide-and-seek existence which I am leading; and were it not for present consulation in the shape of the charming Julia's favours, and the hope of future reward, I do not think that I could prosecute the business much farther. But what can you suggest?—how can we possibly compel either of these sisters to be explicit as to their secret proceedings?"

"Our course is a difficult one," remarked Malpas. "Lady Sackville especially declared that she would not have me adopt direct and positive measures to expose these girls to the Princess."

"Neither would I do so," said Curzon, emphatically. "I would not treacherously betray Julia to her mistress, and thus cause the ignominious dismissal of the poor girl: but I would discover her secrets, if possible, in order to frustrate the designs thus revealed. Or else—which is much better—I should like to contrive something that would bring matters to a crisis at once, and compel Emma to elope with you and Julia with me; so that the necessity should cease for this lurking, stealthy, sneaking, hole-and-corner kind of existence, and that it should have an end."

"Well then, let us lay our heads together and see what we can think of," remarked Colonel Malpas, drawing his chair in a confidential manner still more closely to that of the Earl of Curzon.

But here we must leave Venetia's two emissaries for the present, to discuss their plans,—while we transport the reader's attention back to England.

CHAPTER CXXVII.

THE MAID OF HONOUR.

It will be remembered that amongst the letters which Venetia examined on the occasion when she received the pearls from Lord Leveson, was one written by Miss Bathurst strongly recommending the necessity of making immediate provision for Mrs. Arbuthnot and her daughter Penelope. Lady Sackville had accordingly used her influence with the Prince for this purpose; and the result was the appointment of Mrs. Arbuthnot to fill a vacancy which occurred in the Queen's household by the resignation of Lady Prescott, and the subsequent nomination of Miss Penelope to the post of Maid of Honour likewise in the Queen's establishment.

Lady Prescott had resigned her situation of Bed-Chamber Woman shortly after the scene at Lady Wenlock's, some particulars of which had got noised abroad: and thus was it that Mrs. Arbuthnot had been enabled to slide gently and comfortably into that berth. Behold therefore this lady and her daughter Penelope now fairly inducted into a Court life, through the influence of Venetia,—with good salaries, and handsome apartments at Windsor Castle.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was a woman who had long lived by being toady, duenna, or companion to those into whose households she could obtain recommendations, or into whose favour she could ingratiate herself—and thus it was a most important event for her to obtain so good a situation as the one above mentioned. Thoroughly worldly-minded, and having too long been compelled to live upon her "wits" to have retained much of her originally good principles, she considered self-interest to be the dominant aim of existence; and when she gazed upon her daughter it was with the hope that she would make the best of the opportunity now afforded her to contract some advantageous marriage, or form some still more valuable *connexion*. For, be it understood that Mrs. Arbuthnot was one of those detestable mothers who would sooner see their daughters become the mistresses of rich men than the wives of poor ones; and Mrs. Arbuthnot did not fail to recommend Penelope to do her best to attract the notice of the royal princes—no matter which one—but the Prince Regent himself, if possible.

Miss Penelope was somewhat terrified by the manner in which her mother thus addressed her—for Mrs. Arbuthnot did not deem it necessary to adopt much ambiguity of language when incul-

cating her worldly doctrines. The young lady, being past twenty-five years of age, was quite old enough to understand her mother's meaning, and quite virtuous enough to recoil from it. She had little maudlin sentimentalism about her, and no prudery: but was not sufficiently depraved in mind to be willing to surrender up her person to the first princely bidder. The "innate virtue of the woman" was not totally spoilt within her, although she had been placed in situations that fully opened her eyes to the intrigues and immoralities of fashionable life. She herself had however remained pure in body, and only partially contaminated in mind;—and at all events, as we have before observed, she possessed a sufficient amount of proper feeling to render her heartily ashamed of the base and almost undisguised recommendations proffered by her mother.

In personal appearance, Penelope was not exactly beautiful—nor yet handsome: but she was a fine young woman, with a well developed figure, an animated countenance, luxuriant hair, and large bright eyes. She moreover possessed a brilliant set of teeth—a pair of ripe red lips, whence the most luscious kisses might to all appearances be culled—and a clear healthy complexion. Her voice was flute-like and well calculated to stir up the amorous emotions of the susceptible temperament: her arms were somewhat too robust for perfect symmetry, but splendidly rounded and brilliantly polished—and her feet and ankles were equally faultless in their sculptural perfection, though evidently belonging to limbs that were largely and even massively formed. Her bust was on the same fine scale—the bosoms being large without luxuriance, and full without any detriment to their firmness. There was a certain animation in her looks which might be mistaken at a first glance for boldness—but a close and steadier survey would show that it was only the liveliness of good spirits, commingling as it were with the thoughts that naturally belonged to the experience of a young woman who was already verging towards the ripe age of twenty-six.

Such was Penelope Arbuthnot: and when dressed in the tasteful elegance of her walking-costume, with the long ringlets showering down from under the brims of a large fashionable bonnet—or arranged in the splendour of satin or velvet when her toilette for the dinner-table or the evening party was completed—the new Maid of Honour was of striking and brilliant appearance. Indeed, as she occupied her place at the royal dinner-table, or moved amidst the gay throng in the gilded saloon, she would have been pronounced a handsome woman by even a critical observer: and thus without actual perfection of features, but with only a tolerable regularity of profile, she was calculated to pass as one of the most brilliant ornaments of the Court and Fashion.

The Prince Regent had lately visited Windsor Castle much oftener than had previously been his wont, because he was now very seriously thinking of finding a husband for his daughter the Princess Charlotte, whose character was daily developing a higher spirit and a growing impatience of control. Being resolved to marry her off-hand, it became necessary for the Prince to make a fitting selection of a husband for her; and in this very important matter was it requisite that he should hold frequent consultations with his mother the Queen. Hence those numerous visits to Windsor which he had recently paid: and on these occasions he had been led to take special notice of Penelope.

When once the Prince Regent fixed his eyes upon a woman, it was with the resolve to possess her;—and to this end was his mind always made up whenever the fancy struck him, even before he had bestowed a single reflection upon the means whereby his determination was to be carried out. As for being contented with one mistress—even though this mistress was the most transcendently beautiful woman that had ever yet shone in the circles of fashion—the idea was altogether out of the question: for when once away from Carlton House and beyond the influence of Venetia's smiles, the Prince Regent was as much inclined as ever to fulfil his destiny as the most insatiate and unprincipled voluptuary that ever disgraced the world.

It was now the middle of the month of March at about the same time that the events occurred at Geneva; and the weather in England was more than usually bleak and tempestuous. Thus was it that on one particular day the Prince Regent, having driven over at an early hour from London to Windsor, found himself compelled to remain longer than he had intended in consequence of a sudden deluge of rain. Although he had made arrangemements to return to Carlton House to hold a Privy Council, and afterwards to entertain a party at dinner, he declared "that both the Right Honourable Councillors and the invited guests might go to the devil, sooner than he would run the chance of being dragged, even in a close carriage, along flooded roads and with the rain beating strong enough to drive in the windows." He accordingly remained to pass the day at Windsor Castle; and as in the evening there were no guests at the dinner-table—merely the Queen, the Princess Augusta, the Ladies, Lords, and Gentlemen of her Majesty's household—the Prince was enabled to place himself next to Penelope. The King who was more than usually mad just at this period, and was prone to the performance of strange unkingly antics, was kept close in his own private apartment; and the Princess Charlotte, the Prince Regent's daughter, being somewhat indisposed, also remained in her own chamber.

The circle at the royal dinner-table was therefore limited upon this occasion; and the Prince, being thus enabled the more easily to throw off all unnecessary ceremonial restraint, gave way to those gaieties of conversation in which he excelled so much. Penelope not only possessed a natural flow of good spirits, but was also quick, sprightly, and ready-witted in her discourse; and she therefore shone on the present occasion to considerable advantage. The Prince was more than ever pleased with her;—and as he beheld the colour heightening upon her cheeks, enhancing the animation of her looks, and pouring additional floods of lustre into her fine eyes, he thought within himself that he had often taken the trouble to make a less worthy and desirable conquest than this.

Penelope, however, was perfectly innocent in thus developing her attractive qualities in so provocative a manner towards the Prince. She had no ulterior design—she did not even lay herself out to attract his notice: her behaviour was the natural

and unstudied outpouring of good spirits, sufficiently tempered by proper taste and breeding. But at length, when she beheld the Prince's eyes settling with a peculiar look upon her, after the champagne had been handed to him three or four times, she instantaneously comprehended that it was quite possible for him to have put a wrong construction on her demeanour and discourse. She saw how the unaffected frankness of the former and the spontaneous sprightliness of the latter, might receive an evil interpretation in the mind of a man who was himself too much saturated with impure notions to be able to give others credit for innocence and purity of purpose; and when flinging her eyes across the table, Penelope beheld her mother gazing upon her with a satisfaction the nature of which was not to be mistaken, the young lady experienced a sudden shock that produced as it were a complete revulsion of feeling within her.

She however had too much good taste as well as self-possession to turn suddenly cold or distant: but she nevertheless gradually diminished the sprightliness of her conversation, while the blooming animation of her countenance proportionately yielded to a modest composure. The Prince was too keen and sagacious in such matters not to perceive that her spirits had received a sudden chill; and he did his best to rally her: but she now replied with only a calm courtesy;—and soon afterwards the Queen, rising to retire from the drawing-room, was of course followed thither by all the ladies, Penelope being thus relieved from the embarrassment which she had experienced for the last quarter of an hour.

The Prince, who scarcely ever neglected his bottle even for the finest woman in existence, remained at table drinking with the lords and gentlemen of the royal household; but presently they repaired to the drawing-room, to rejoin the

Queen and the ladies in attendance. On entering the spacious and gorgeously-furnished saloon, the Prince looked hastily around in search of Penelope; and to his chagrin he observed that she was occupying a seat as close as possible to the Queen,—so that even if he accosted her, he could not possibly breathe the slightest syllable in her ear without being overheard by his prim, starch, vinegar-looking mother. But alone on a sofa, at a considerable distance from the fire around which the rest of the royal party had gathered, Mrs. Arbuthnot was seated: and the Prince, as if in a kindly patronising courtesy towards an elderly lady, went and placed himself by her side.

"Mrs. Arbuthnot," he said, throwing into his manner all the affability that was one of the ingredients of the hypocrisy which he knew so well how to assume for his own purposes,—"I was much delighted in having the opportunity to use my influence with my august mother, and obtain for you that post which Lady Prescott so suddenly vacated."

"And I am charmed," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, "in having this opportunity of expressing to your Royal Highness the lively sense of gratitude which I experience for the favour thus shown to me: and likewise I must avail myself of the present occasion to thank you with equal sincerity on behalf of my daughter, for whom your Royal Highness was also graciously pleased to use your influence."

"Ah! your daughter—to be sure!" said the Prince, affecting to be reminded of what was full well known to him already: "that handsome young lady who sat next to me at the dinner-table just now, is your daughter—I recollect! By the by, she was at Carlton House along with you, my dear madam, that night when we had the private theatricals."

"To be sure, your Royal Highness," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Well, but I do not think that we all behaved very properly on that occasion—did we?" said the Prince; "after supper, if I remember right, there was some kissing and toying."

"Oh! yes—a little," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But wherever your royal Highness is, everybody is so gay and happy."

"Yes—but if your daughter is unmarried—and at her age too," said the Prince, lowering his tone, "that kind of amusement is rather dangerous. Kisses, you know, my dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, are the flowers which one gathers on the threshold of paradise: but the bold and venturous one often follows up the advantage, and taking elysium as it were by storm, plucks the forbidden fruit."

"I can assure you, sir," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that my daughter—without being a prude, remember—is a young woman of prudence."

"No doubt of it, Mrs. Arbuthnot," interrupted the Prince: "but——"

"And I was going to observe," continued the lady, "that although such little kissing, and toying, and trifling dalliances to which your Royal Highness has alluded, may smooth down all the asperities of a woman's virtue, yet still the virtue itself may remain intact."

"Though deprived of some of its strongest defences—eh? Is that your meaning, my dear madam?" inquired the Prince, laughing, though speaking in a low and guarded tone.

"I think that such was my meaning," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, also smiling, but with a sort of subdued significancy.

"How is it, my dear madam," asked the Prince, "that you have not managed to find a husband for your daughter yet?"

"Really your Royal Highness should direct Parliament to levy a tax upon bachelors," answered the Bed-chamber Woman, again smiling. "But it is strange, considering that Penelope has moved in the very best society—that she is highly accomplished—and, as your Royal Highness perceives, is not ill-looking."

"Ill-looking!" he echoed. "On the contrary—she is a very fine girl—a very fine girl—or young woman, rather:—between five or six-and-twenty I should say, if it were not rude to guess a lady's age—ripe as the peach——"

"As her mother, sir, I feel proud at the compliment that you thus pay my daughter: and though I say it, who am her parent, she is decidedly one of the finest figures I ever saw. Her milliner assured me this morning——But really, your Royal Highness must think me very indiscreet," said the wily woman, suddenly interrupting herself, and appearing to be much shocked at the idea of having committed a sad solecism in propriety and decency.

"Pray go on," said the Prince. "You were speaking with the very pardonable pride of a mother; and it pleases me to hear a fond and affectionate parent thus discourse. Pray go on, I repeat. You were telling me that your daughter's milliner passed some opinion? No doubt it was to the effect that Miss Penelope is one of the best made young ladies——"

"Now, to speak candidly, it *was* an observation to that effect," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, who from the corner of her eye was attentively watching all the evidences of those rising passions which she was thus methodically and cunningly provoking on the part of the Prince: then, as she observed the colour deepening on his cheeks, the salacious sucking of his lips, and the gloating expression with which his eyes plunged across the room to fix themselves upon Penelope, she continued in a low and confidential whisper, "Indeed, sir, the milliner declared that of all the ladies belonging to the Court and Aristocracy who patronize her establishment, not one is so symmetrically and at the same time so finely formed as my daughter."

"You should marry her—you should marry her," said the Prince, in the hurried tone of his aroused desires. "It would be a positive sin to suffer such a splendid creature to stand the chance of dying an old maid."

"It is easy to say *marry her*," remarked the astute Mrs. Arbuthnot: "but it is not so easy to procure a good match; and sooner than she should become the wife of a poor or obscure individual——"

"Ah! I perceive you are a lady of great prudence," observed the Prince, now beginning to entertain a faint suspicion that it was not altogether without a motive that Mrs. Arbuthnot had struck into this somewhat extraordinary line of discourse: but determined at once to put her to the test and ascertain whether his suspicion was

well founded or not, he said in a low voice, and fixing a peculiar look upon her, "Some very prudent and careful mammas prefer that their daughters should be rich men's mistresses than poor men's wives."

"The morality may be bad," returned Mrs. Arbuthnot, perfectly unabashed, "but the worldly wisdom of the maxim cannot be disputed."

"Are you really serious in this observation?" inquired the Prince, with a certain purpose still more plainly expressed in his look.

"I can assure you, sir, I never was more serious in my life," responded the wily woman.

"But the maxim may be only one which you recommend to others," urged the Prince, "without perhaps any intention of practising it yourself?"

"Then were my sincerity indeed something to be impugned," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But 'tis otherwise. What I preach I am prepared to practise."

"And if some one were to put you to the test?" said the Prince, in a still more confidential tone than before.

"It all depends on who the person might be," was the immediate response.

"Let us suppose a case," resumed his Royal Highness. "We will, then, for argument's sake, imagine that one of my brothers—a Prince of the Blood Royal—should make overtures to Miss Penelope: as a matter of course it could not be for her to become his wife,—it must be to make her his mistress. Now, what would be the answer in such a case?"

"I cannot positively declare what my daughter's response would be," returned Mrs. Arbuthnot: "but I know very well that if I were consulted in the matter I should not only give my advice, but also use my influence to compel an affirmative reply."

"Now indeed may we soon understand each other," said his Royal Highness, speaking quickly and in a tone of excitement: "let us suppose that instead of being one of my brothers who made the overture whereof we have spoken, it was I—the Prince Regent—who ventured to breathe such a proposition in your ears relative to your handsome daughter Penelope!"

"I should consent at once and unhesitatingly," answered the worldly-minded mother: for she saw full well that the Prince Regent was perfectly serious in what he said.

"Then, without another word, we understand each other," rejoined his Royal Highness, fixing upon her a look of the deepest meaning. "This night——"

"Yes—this night—if your Royal Highness wills it," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, in a low but firm voice: then after a few moments' hesitation, she said, "Her Majesty will doubtless retire early, as is her wont—and immediately afterwards I will represent to my daughter the honour which your Royal Highness intends her. Then if you will await me here, or in any other room, I will rejoin your Royal Highness as speedily as possible——"

"Good!" said the Prince. "But do you not observe how the handsome Penelope regards us at this moment? Is there not a certain uneasiness—a certain suspicion—in her looks?"

"Yes—there may be," replied the mother: "for I have already assured you, sir, that Penelope is a virtuous young woman."

"Though perhaps more or less prepared to lose her virtue when somewhat hardly pressed," added the Prince. "But here—within the walls of this castle—she is completely in my power. We will try persuasion first; and if that will not do, then force must be resorted to. But if you, as her mother, give your consent——"

"Let us hope that Penelope will too well appreciate the honour that is intended her," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "not to receive your Royal Highness with suitable respect."

Then for some few minutes longer did the vile woman and the voluptuous Prince remain in deep and earnest discourse, until all the details of the infamous bargain were fully settled and the terms were fixed whereupon the mother was to surrender her daughter into the arms of the royal voluptuary.

CHAPTER CXXVIII.

THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

It was eleven o'clock. The Queen had retired to her suite of apartments, attended by those ladies whose turn it was to wait upon her that night, while Penelope, withdrawing to her own chamber, was closely followed by her mother.

The bed-room allotted to the maid of honour was at the end of a long passage, and was situated in a somewhat retired position. It was in one of the oldest portions of the castle, and had a certain antique gloominess of appearance. The window was small—the walls were thick—and as the floor was below the level of the corridor communicating therewith, there was a descent of two or three steps into the room. Altogether, it fully answered the description of one of those chambers which the imagination of the romance-writer or novelist loves to envelope in loneliness and mystery: but until this particular night Penelope had experienced no apprehension with regard to the secluded position and cheerless aspect of her apartment.

"Mother," said the young lady, the moment she and her parent entered the room, "I know not how it is, but I feel a presentiment of evil creeping over me:"—and she looked very hard in Mrs. Arbuthnot's face.

"Nonsense, my dear girl!" exclaimed the wily woman. "So far from evil threatening you, fortune is preparing to shed its golden beams upon your head."

"Ah!" ejaculated Penelope, with that abruptness of tone and sharp quick movement of the head which showed that from her mother's words she had just received the confirmation of a suspicion which had been haunting her all the latter part of the evening. "But perhaps you will explain yourself?" she added with assumed coldness.

"Penelope," responded her mother, "if you were a girl of sixteen or seventeen, I should experience some difficulty in entering upon a certain topic: but as you have reached an age at which your experience is to a certain extent matured, I need scarcely adopt any sophistry or circumlocution in order to explain my meaning. Besides, you have already comprehended it—I see by your manner that you have!"

"Yes—I am indeed fearful that I have," replied the Maid of Honour: "and if my suspicion be true—if my surmise be correct—Oh, then it will be a sad and fatal hour for me—for it will teach me to despise and contemn, perhaps even to *hate* my own mother!"

"Penelope, this is ridiculous—this is preposterous—this is absurd on your part!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "It is impossible that you can in reality be so squeamish. When I had you up from the country first of all, to pass a few days with me at Acacia Cottage, did I not explain to you for what purpose I had been placed as a companion and duenna about the person of Venetia Trelawney, as Lady Sackville then was?—did I not tell you that it was destined for her to become the mistress of the Prince, to the consummation of which aim all arrangements were then tending?—and did you not appear to envy Venetia the brilliant position which her friends were endeavouring to obtain for her? Did you not, moreover, aid me in flattering and complimenting her?—did you not also assist me in performing the part of a spy upon her actions, so as to prevent the probability of her escape from that track in which she was a mere puppet moving according to the will of those who secretly pulled the strings? Did you not, I ask, enter with spirit into all the proceedings whereof I am now speaking?"

"True!" cried Penelope, with evident impatience: then flinging her flashing looks upon Mrs. Arbuthnot, she exclaimed, "But all that is no reason why my own mother should make a bargain to sell me to the Prince of Wales!"

"Foolish girl!" immediately rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot: "do you mean to spurn the hand which fortune extends towards you? Pause for a moment and reflect. You have now an opportunity of rising to rank and fortune, like Venetia——"

"Aye—but Venetia was prudent enough to marry beforehand," cried Penelope, "and thus make the nuptial garment a cloak for her amour with his Royal Highness. Now, understand me well, mother! Were I married to a complaisant husband—like Horace, for instance—I should most probably tread precisely in Venetia's path if the opportunity were afforded: but I will not consent to be bought and sold in the manner which the Prince and yourself seem to have settled between you. Remember, the consequences of an amour to an unmarried woman may be disgrace and ruin! If Venetia should become a mother, there is a legitimate father for her child: but if my surrender were to involve me in such an embarrassment, should I not be ruined altogether? Besides, once for all, my mind revolts from the idea of being thus handed over to the arms of a sensualist: and thus you see, mother, I have quite prudence and virtue enough to tell you frankly that I am not yet prepared to become the mistress of the Prince!"

"Again I say that you are a foolish self-willed girl," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot angrily. "Totally blind to your own interests, you will not listen to reason. Here you are, nearly twenty-six years of age—still unmarried—and still without a suitor for your hand. Although handsome, you are now no chicken, my dear: and being fortuneless, you have no special attraction to induce any rich nobleman to make you his wife. Believe me, then, your prospects with regard to marriage are by no means brilliant under present circumstances. As for your virtue, it is no recommendation now; because few will give you credit for possessing it at your age. But suppose you yield to the solicitations of the Prince—suppose that you become his mistress—we should take care to have the circumstance whispered about; and then many a younger son of the nobility will be anxious to secure your hand. Thus what you may call your *loss of virtue* would no doubt end in procuring you an excellent match; and thus also, by the sacrifice of your *honour*, will you exhibit the real prudence of a woman of the world."

"No—I cannot—I will not yield to this base and degrading sophistry!" exclaimed Penelope. "Now, mother, leave me! Another word from your lips upon this subject, and I shall hate you!"

"But, my dear Penelope," argued the vile woman, "do listen to reason——"

"God forgive you, mother, for thus seeking to prostitute your own daughter!" said the young lady, the tears running down her cheeks.

"Ah! you weep, my child—you weep?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot, a sudden thought inspiring her with a diabolic prompting how to turn this emotion on her daughter's part to serve the infamous purpose she had in view. "Yes—you weep, I say! But far more bitter will be your tears when you behold your mother suddenly stricken down by a misfortune the consequences of which will redound upon your own head."

"A misfortune!" ejaculated Penelope. "What mean you?"

"I mean, daughter," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that I am threatened by a remorseless creditor—a creditor for a large sum, contracted some years ago—you remember when I was compelled to break up our establishment in Harley Street?"

"Yes, yes," said Penelope, in the quick and excited tone of suspense. "Go on, mother—go on."

"Well, this creditor of whom I speak had lost sight of me until within these last few weeks: but now perceiving my name in the Court Circular, he has found me out—he has been to the castle—and he has declared that if within a week I pay him not the amount, he will have me dragged away to prison!"

"Heavens—the threatened disgrace!" ejaculated Penelope, in consternation.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, now appearing to sob bitterly; "it would be my ruin—my utter ruin—and yours also, unfortunate girl! You know how particular—how very particular the Queen is, and she would at once dismiss me from my situation. Then, how could you possibly retain yours? The sense of degradation and of shame would compel you to resign: you could not possibly remain at Court while all the world knew that your mother was the inmate of a debtor's gaol!"

"But this debt, mother," exclaimed Penelope, with increasing excitement, "what is the amount?"

"Nearly four thousand pounds, with the interest," was the response: and Mrs. Arbuthnot continued to sob and rock herself to and fro on the chair in which she was seated.

"Four thousand pounds!" ejaculated Penelope, frightened at the magnitude of the debt. "And must it all be raised at one moment? Can we not mortgage our salaries, or a portion of them?"

"If we could, how should we be enabled to maintain our position at Court?" demanded Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Would you feel comfortable in being pointed at as shabby?—would you like to appear constantly in the same dresses—faded silks—soiled satins—dirty gloves——No, no—it is ridiculous! Besides, even if all this were possible, the creditor will not wait: he is merciless! A warrant is already issued against me—and the bailiffs will come tomorrow——"

"Good heavens, can all this be true?" cried Penelope, now a prey to the deepest anguish.

"True!" exclaimed her mother, with a start of apparent indignation and surprise. "Do you think that I would thus torture your feelings for mere amusement? But stop—I will fetch from my own room certain letters which will prove——"

"Enough, mother—I believe you!" said Penelope, her momentary incredulity suddenly dissipating in the presence of Mrs. Arbuthnot's tone, look, and manner. "But have you not applied to any of your friends? Lady Sackville—Miss Bathurst—Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"My dear Penelope, I have applied to them all, and they cannot assist me. I am reduced to despair—and hence was it——I know not exactly how it happened that the discourse gradually took the turn it did——but thus was it, I say, that I listened to the words which the Prince ere now breathed in my ears relative to yourself. For he declares that you are handsome—that he loves you—that he will seek opportunities of conferring all possible favours upon you—and that the individual whom self-interest may induce to become your husband, shall have honours, titles, and pensions heaped upon him. Thus may you, Penelope, become the rival of Lady Sackville: thus also may the husband whom you are certain to obtain, rise to a high position, like Lord Sackville——"

"Enough, mother!" exclaimed Penelope, appearing to be nerved with the sudden courage of a desperate resolve. "My mind is made up—that is to say, if the Prince, as I suppose, will relieve you from your embarrassment?"

"I have already told you as much," hastily responded her mother. "And therefore you consent?" she demanded eagerly and greedily.

"Yes—I consent," answered Penelope, in a low voice, while upon her cheeks the colour went and came in rapid transitions. "'Tis better that I should do this than that we should both be ruined: 'tis better that I should make the sacrifice of all my most delicate feelings, than that we should be plunged into the depths of poverty."

"Ah! now you speak like a woman of sense," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot: then inclining towards her daughter, so that her lips nearly touched the young lady's ear, she said in a low and rapid voice, "But when the Prince comes to your chamber in a few minutes, let him not be received with coldness and reserve. Be not unto him inanimate and passionless as a marble statue——"

"Oh! leave me, leave me, mother!" exclaimed the young lady, shuddering all over with the deepest sense of humiliation and shame. "There is something dreadful—aye, even horrible—in hearing such injunctions come from the lips of a parent! Let it suffice that I sacrifice myself——"

"Well, well—I will say no more," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot: then hastily imprinting a kiss upon her daughter's cheek, she hurried from the chamber to carry the tidings of her success to the Prince Regent, who was impatiently awaiting her coming in the drawing-room where the evening had been spent by the royal party.

So soon as her mother had withdrawn, Penelope began to lay aside her apparel. She was armed as it were with the fortitude of a desperate resolution. Having made up her mind to the worst, she abandoned herself to the current of what appeared to be her destiny—or rather, to the control of the strong compulsion that ruled her with an imperious necessity. In such a mood did she gather up and arrange the masses of her luxuriant hair for the night: and when in a state of semi-nudity she seated herself upon the couch to divest herself of her remaining apparel, she could not help clasping her hands with a sudden paroxysm of anguish at the thought of all the circumstances under which she was about to surrender herself into the arms of the princely voluptuary.

But at the same moment the door was gently opened—and his Royal Highness entered the chamber of the Maid of Honour.

The moment he flung his gaze upon Penelope, he devoured as it were all her charms with that rapid burning look. He beheld her indeed as finely formed as her wily mother had more than intimated that she was; and as the wing of the bird sweeps over the surface of the sea, thus passing from wave to wave with whirlwind speed, so did the glance of the royal sensualist travel quick from charm to charm—from contour to contour,—from shoulders of firmness and whiteness to breasts still more plump and dazzling, rising like two swelling globes from the surface of an ample chest—well divided—rich in their sculptural proportions without being too luxuriant—and each crowned with a delicate rose-bud. Thence did his looks sweep along the white and well-rounded arms so admirably modelled in their robustness—so glowing and warm even in their whiteness,—and belonging to a figure which, though somewhat largely proportioned, was perfectly symmetrical, and all the flowing outlines of which were developed by the drapery that hung loosely about it. Nor were the Prince's eyes averted or arrested in that first sweeping glance, ere they had likewise embraced the statuesque moulding of the lower limbs—so full and robust where fullness and robustness were proper—so slender where the well-turned ankles required such slenderness—and with the shapely feet so long and narrow!

Notwithstanding her hands were joined and her looks were mournful, when the eye of the Prince thus rapidly scanned all the charms that were more than half exposed, there was nevertheless a kind of languid voluptuousness which hung at the moment about that young woman, and which at once seized like the intoxicating influence of highly perfumed flowers upon the senses of the Prince: so that his brain appeared to reel for a moment as he paused upon one of the descending steps. But the next instant he sprang forward—he caught her in his embrace—he pressed her in his arms—and murmuring some tender syllables, he covered her with his caresses.

CHAPTER CXXIX.

ABJECT GREATNESS.

It was about two o'clock in the morning, and all was silence throughout Windsor Castle. Penelope—a Maid of Honour now only in name—slept in the arms of the Prince Regent; and the lamp, which burnt upon the table in her chamber, shed its flickering beams on the flushed countenance of his Royal Highness and also on the carnation-tinted cheeks of his new mistress.

On the features of the latter this crimson glow was the blush of mingled joy and of shame—of pleasure and of pain—of ineffable enjoyment and of deep regret, which had lingered there even after slumber had steeped her senses in the blissful confusion of the dreams that perpetuated to some extent the feelings just previously experienced. It was the blush of beauty and of love which sits upon the rose even when in close contact with its attendant thorn: it was the blush which suffused the countenance of Eve when, having gathered the fruit of the tree of knowledge, she cast her eyes upon herself and saw that she was naked!

Sweetly and serenely did Penelope appear to be slumbering. The rich fringes of her closed eyes lay upon her cheeks, forming dark boundaries as it were between the dazzling white of the eyelid above and the deep carnation which glowed on the plump flesh below. Her lips, slightly apart, seemed yet moist with the kisses which had been pressed upon them; and as they revealed the pearly teeth which lay within, the effect was that of the white seeds shining amidst the red and pulpy richness of a tropical fruit which in its ripeness has burst open. The light of the lamp also fell upon the bosom which, totally exposed, rose and fell with the long, gradual, and apparently measured undulations that accompany the respiring action of a woman who sleeps soundly, tranquilly, and well;—and while one arm lay beneath the Prince's head, the other reposed outside the coverlid,—the entire abandonment of Penelope's posture thus forming a charming picture for the novelist to describe or the painter to delineate.

Though deep was the carnation upon her cheeks, yet was it also delicate and pure—a wholesome and a healthful bloom, like the vermeil upon the peach or the flush of the morning along the orient sky. But of a coarser, ruddier, and still deeper hue was the redness which sat upon the countenance of the Prince—a redness arising from animal passions in all their utter grossness, and which borrowed the depth of its colouring as much from the wine-press of Bacchus as from the roseate bowers of Venus. Such was the contrast presented by the sleeping pair. Yet safely may we argue that in the newly-experienced raptures of passion, the anger of Penelope at being thus sold and bought was well nigh absorbed; and at all events in the dreams which now followed there was more of pleasurable emotion than of pain and mortification.

It was two o'clock, we said; and all was silent throughout Windsor Castle. But, hark! that stillness, a moment before so profound, is now disturbed though faintly, by the the tread of footsteps! Whence do they come? From a distant chamber of the castle. But whither are they now tending? Quickly and excitedly do they advance along the corridor, whence the apartments of several of the younger damsels open, and at the far end of which is situate the chamber of Penelope Arbuthnot. But who is it that thus threads that passage with such agitated steps? 'Tis an old man, of middle height—stout—wearing an old-fashioned wig—enveloped in a dressing-gown which he holds around him—and with his naked feet thrust into a pair of red morocco slippers. His eyes are open: but does he walk in his sleep, or is he actually awake? At all events, singular—or rather fearful and horrible—are the variable expressions which his countenance takes, in changing and rapid reflex of the thoughts that are sweeping through his mind. In his eyes may at one moment be seen the wild glare of maniac ferocity—at another the inane vacancy of dull idiotcy.

Who is this old man that thus wanders through the castle at such an hour, and on whose features the rays of the lamps suspended at intervals fling their beams with such hideous effects? We shall see presently. But whither goes he? He places his hand upon the latch of Penelope's door, which the Prince, in his ardour to embrace his new conquest, had forgotten to secure when he first entered, and which she herself, in the confusion attendant upon that entrance of her royal suitor, had likewise forgotten to fasten. Therefore the door yields to that old man's touch. He enters—he closes it behind him—and he approaches the couch.

An ejaculation burst from his lips as he beheld the Prince Regent in the arms of the Maid of Honour;—and at that ejaculation both the occupants of the couch awoke with a sudden start from their slumber. And simultaneous ejaculations of mingled surprise, terror, and dismay burst also from their lips, as in this visitor who had thus disturbed them they recognized the King!

"Good God—my father!" said the Prince Regent: while Penelope, after the first cry of alarm had burst from her lips and the first glance of recognition flashed from her eyes, hastened to bury herself beneath the bed-clothes, in a confusion, horror, and bewilderment of feeling more readily conceived than described.

And no wonder that such should have been the state of mind into which she was so suddenly thrown on thus beholding his Majesty George III standing by her bedside! For as we have already hinted in previous chapters, the King was at this time a confirmed and hopeless lunatic,—his madness developing itself in various phases, sometimes mischievous, sometimes tranquil—now indicative of the most brutal and ferocious instincts, now displaying extreme docility and mildness—now breaking forth into the most ludicrous freaks and absurd antics, then melting into pathos or sinking down into complete lethargy. That on the present occasion he had escaped from the supervision of those who were appointed to attend upon him, and that having wandered about the castle he had found his way either by accident, or through some motive of maniac cunning, to Penelope's room, were convictions that instantaneously struck both this lady and her royal paramour. That some violence was to be apprehended, or that disturbance and exposure would take place, were the thoughts which likewise flashed simultaneously to their minds; but as these feelings operated in different ways upon each, it occurred that while Penelope hastily buried herself

beneath the bed-clothes, where she lay breathless in terror and suspense, the Prince made a movement to spring from the couch with the intention of getting his father as noiselessly as possible out of the room.

"Lie still, sir!" instantaneously cried the King, anticipating his son's intent and pushing him back with that sudden exercise of strength which madmen often display to a degree apparently far beyond their natural powers. "Lie still, sir! 'Tis well we have met thus. They told me you were here to-night; and I resolved to seek you. For a long, long time past I have wanted to talk to you tranquilly and quietly: but either you don't come near me when I am disengaged, or else when you do come those cursed people by whom I am surrounded will not let me see you. Now, sir, lie still, I say—or by heaven! I will make you—and listen to what I have to say."

Thus speaking, the King took a chair—drew it to the side of the bed—and seating himself, gazed with a most remarkable expression of mingled horror, wildness, and sorrow upon his son.

On the other hand, the Prince Regent himself looked earnestly and affrightedly up into his father's countenance, to ascertain whether it was in a lucid interval that the old man thus sought him out and addressed him so seriously; or whether, having merely stumbled upon him by accident, his Majesty began giving utterance to any random things that were uppermost in his brain at the instant.

"My dear son," resumed the old King, bending down and speaking in a low voice, and with looks full of mysterious horror,—but evidently without taking the slightest notice of the fair form that lay huddled up under the bed-clothes by the Prince's side,—"my dear son, I have long wanted to talk seriously to you. I have had strange dreams of late! Terrible things have sat heavily upon my thoughts: monsters, spectres, apparitions, and shapes of every variety of horror have been haunting me. What could it all mean? Heavens! what appalling objects have I beheld! what shocking things have they whispered in my ears! Ghost of Hannah Lightfoot! wherefore dost thou trouble me? Yes—'tis true—I know that I seduced thee under solemn pledges and sacred promises; I know that I deceived thee—that I was a perjurer—a violater of my oaths! I know also that thou didst die of grief, and that I am thy murderer—yes, thy murderer!"

And as the lunatic King thus spoke, he sprang up from his chair, turned round, and appeared to be addressing some object which imagination had previously placed behind him. The Prince Regent was appalled at the horror depicted in his father's looks and the imploring accents of rending anguish that marked his tone: while Penelope, under the influence of some unaccountable feeling of awful curiosity, deeply mingled with dread consternation, slowly peeped forth from beneath the bed-clothes and remained with her eyes fixed upon the fearful spectacle presented by the miserable old King.

"Oh! what vulture-talons are these which fasten upon my brain?" continued the monarch, still apostrophising the shadow which his disordered imagination conjured up. "Why dost thou thus pursue me, Hannah? Oh! wherefore with those hollow eyes of thine look out upon me from thy shroud? Ah! dost thou say that I clad thee ere thy time in that winding-sheet which enwraps thy form? O God! put off that garment of the grave, and come to me as was thy wont long years ago, when in the bloom of thy beauty and the spring-tide of our love. Avaunt, avaunt! stretch not out thy skeleton arms to me. Heavens! is it madness now that sears my brain? Oh! will not death relieve me from the earthly hell of this misery? But, ah! the sleep of death is often a hideous sleep—a sleep in which vampyre-wings wrap the soul around and vampyre-maws prey upon the heart. Oh! be satisfied, Hannah: I come to thee—I come! Inflame not with the terrors of thy looks the torments that are hurrying me to the grave. The woes of centuries have cumulated upon my soul—upon my head rests the gathered curse of ages! I know that I am a king—and the grandest triumphs have greeted me. Yet what dark gulfs and fathomless abysms exist in my soul, that all the light of England's diadem can never reach, much less fill!"

Then, sinking with the exhaustion of his tensely wrung emotions, the wretched old King fell back into the chair by the side of the couch, and buried his face in his hands.

Penelope, now somewhat recovering her presence of mind, gently laid her fingers upon the Prince Regent's arm; and as he flung down his look upon her, her eyes asked as eloquently as eyes could speak, "What is to be done?"

The Prince placed his fore-finger upon his lip to recommend silence; then, in the lowest possible whisper, he said, "The dark mood is upon him—let his mind take its course!"

At this moment a convulsive sob broke half-stifled and gaspingly from the very bottom of the old King's heart: then came another sob more piteous still—then another, and another, until his whole frame was convulsed with a rapid succession of these heart-wrung moans, while he rocked to and fro, with an irregular and painful motion, in the increasing agony of his grief. The Prince gazed in mute horror. But as for Penelope, her blood ceased to flow, her breath to come, her pulse to beat: her looks were fixed on that wretched specimen of humanity—that miserable personification of madness, anguish, and compunction, bearing the name of England's King. Oh! dark were the clouds upon that old monarch's mind: but fearfully and vividly did the lightnings of remorse flash through them! For suddenly, and with awful vehemence, did he cast himself on his knees; and raising his wrinkled hands upward, he thus gave vent to the thoughts which were now dominant in his mind.

"Oh! where is the fountain of life, flowing with the blessed waters that can wash out the crimson stains of my many crimes?—what hands shall give me the cold crystalline draught from the Lethean spring, to quench all these fiery memories which burn like scorpions in my brain? What power shall save myself and family from sweeping onward into the universal maelstroom of destruction? Behold, afar off, there is a land where nature is so lovely and sublime that the fairest scenery and the loftiest grandeurs of Europe are in comparison but as a painted panorama to the stupendous original. And into this land, across the western wave, did I send the bloodhounds of war. A great and a gallant people, dwelling in that land, did I seek to coerce

with my tyrannies and to trample beneath the feet of my armed legions. But they arose in their might and their power—they threw off the yoke—and they raised up a man whose glory, whose honour, and whose fame eclipse the highest qualifications of all the Kings of Europe! Yes—Washington! thou, the simple citizen, without pedigree, without title, with naught but the rank of a hero and a patriot,—hast thou placed thyself far above the mightiest monarchs of the world! And a voice comes to me through the night—like the whisper of a spirit or the dreaming of far-off waters—telling me that the age of Kings is well nigh passed, and that of rulers like unto thee is near at hand. Aye, and that same voice tells me that when the nations shall level their execrations against Kings, their voices shall also swell in a joyous pœan to honour thee, O Washington!"

Low, mournful, and lugubrious had grown the voice of George III as he thus delivered himself, with a strange composure and an apparently perfect lucidness, of those thoughts which were uppermost in his mind—thoughts which, had he been really the master of his intellect, he would not have dared to let himself *think*, much less give serious utterance to them!

And now he began pacing backward and forward in the chamber—his steps agitated and uneven, his looks restless and wild, and the workings of his countenance truly horrible to contemplate. A deeper terror—a horror more intense than he had previously experienced—grew upon the Prince Regent, as he sate up in the couch gazing upon his miserable father;—while cowering down by his side, with her looks fixed however upon the same awful spectacle of human woe and degradation, lay Penelope—a dread sensation at her heart, as if she felt that the scene was a judgment upon her for her criminality of this night!

"Oh! horrors are multiplying upon me once more," spoke the wretched King; but now it was in the quick and broken voice of strongly excited feelings. "Whose shade is this that comes? It is not thine, O murdered, heart-broken Hannah Lightfoot! No, no—'tis thine, Amelia—my beloved, my *best* beloved daughter! Oh! terrible was thy death! Never, never shall I forget the horrors of that last scene of thy young life! I behold—I see it now! I hear thy cries—thy self-reproaches—the anguished outpourings of thy remorse! Ah! what word is that which is most often on thy tongue? *Incest.* Yes—incest with thy brother—my son by poor Hannah Lightfoot! Oh! do not reproach me, Amelia: do not look thus upon me! Ah! what?—would'st thou declare that thine own father is thy murderer—that 'tis *his* crime which redounded with overwhelming effect upon thee! O horror! tossed upon the wild waves of anguish, wretchedness, and despair, am I not sufficiently miserable? Ah! through the casement do I now behold that lovely moon, whose silver splendour has oft rivetted my gaze amid the vigils of the long, long night when 'twas believed I slept. Strange—Oh! most strange is the influence which that lovely crescent-moon has upon me! Sometimes its rays seem to penetrate like ice-shafts, so cold—Oh! so cold—through the very brain:"—and the King, stopping suddenly short before the casement as he gazed up into the heavens where hung the silver lamp of night, shuddered as he spoke. "Or else," he exclaimed, now abruptly raising his arms and pressing his hands to his brows,—"or else the beams of yon moon pierce like fiery darts into my brain and thrill throughout the entire form, as if the heat of a lava stream were passing over me. But now—what is this new feeling which seizes upon my heart? Oh! the moon suddenly disappears—she is gone—a cloud has entombed her in its darkness!"

With these words the King turned away from the window, and was again advancing towards the couch, when he started with indescribable horror as if some hideous spectral shape had suddenly risen up before him.

"Ah! 'tis a horrible fiend which I now behold," he exclaimed, in accents penetrated with ineffable agony: "and his name is *Murder.* He points to the east! Yes, yes—I behold the plains of India deluged with blood—the burning villages—the wailing population—the famine-stricken multitudes——Oh! horror, horror! millions are perishing in that far-off orient clime! And those are my armies that are thus doing the work of wholesale destruction! But 'tis I—yes, 'tis I—who sent those armies forth, and whose commands they have thus obeyed! In America, too, more wars—more desolation—more bloodshed—more burnings—more horrors! In Europe, too, war—war—nothing but war. Blood—slaughter—murder—and rapine! Oh! wretch that I am—'tis I who have done it all: 'tis I who have sent the genius of destruction abroad! And they call me *George the Good!* Oh! the mockery—the hideous mockery—while that fiend, the *Fiend of Murder,* stands there, claiming me as his comrade, and smiling upon me with the horrible distortions of his countenance—yet smiling nevertheless, after his demoniac fashion—smiling in gratitude upon me for the myriads of victims which I have offered up to his insatiate maw! And all these horrors which I have inflicted upon the world, have been to gratify mine own ambition. O God! have I not been a scourge and a curse to the human race? Talk of Timour the Tartar—talk of Jenghis Khan—talk of Attila the Hun—talk of Napoleon Bonaparte himself—all these have been angels of forbearance, of mercy, and of humanity in comparison with me! But, Ah! did I breathe Napoleon's name? Oh! 'tis then a presentiment of coming evil that has struck me!"

With these words—and taking no farther heed either of his son or of the lady whose bed that profligate son was sharing—the mad old King rushed from the room, leaving the door wide open behind him.

"I must follow my father," exclaimed the Prince Regent, springing from the couch.

"For heaven's sake, be cautious!—remember what you are doing!" cried Penelope, seizing him by the arm. "Should any one see you go forth from this chamber, or even in the adjoining corridor at all——"

"True, true," said the Prince Regent, suddenly recollecting how necessary it was to observe proper precaution: then, having hastily closed and bolted the door, he hurried back to Penelope's arms, murmuring in a low voice, "Besides, on second thoughts, I would not for all the mad old fathers in the world, abandon *you,* my charmer, one minute before it is necessary for us to part!"

"But that scene with his Majesty—Oh! was it not dreadful—dreadful?" whispered Penelope, shuddering from head to foot while clasped in the arms of her royal paramour.

"Think no more of it, my angel," responded the Prince: and he sealed her lips with kisses.

A few more words will suffice to close this chapter. The King regained his own apartments without creating any farther alarm in the castle, and indeed without having been missed by the persons specially charged with the care of his royal person. Without any fresh interruption, therefore, did the Prince Regent continue to enjoy the companionship of the handsome and now amorous Penelope, until the dawn of morning through the casement compelled him to leave the paradise of her arms and retrace his way stealthily back to his own chamber.

At the breakfast-table they met again; but Penelope had reached that age when a woman having committed a fault, knows how to veil it; and thus, if the natural glow did for a moment deepen upon her cheeks as she met the eyes of the Prince and received from him a look of gratitude for the night of bliss he had passed in her arms, that flush was as transitory as the remorse which the young lady felt for her criminality. Indeed, the barrier of her virtue being now completely broken down and the last remaining stronghold of her purity having been effectually stormed, she was prepared to yield herself up to pleasing dreams of ambition and to all worldly aspirations. But scarcely had the royal party sat down to breakfast, when a messenger arrived at the castle with urgent despatches from London; and the moment the Prince Regent cast his eyes over the first of these letters, he sprang to his feet, exclaiming, "Perdition! Titan has broken loose again, and has escaped from his vulture, his chain, and his rock!"

"What mean you, George?" demanded the

Queen, trembling with the anxiety of suspense: for she saw that something strange or terrible had happened.

"I mean," responded the Prince, in a voice indicative of great excitement,—"I mean that Bonaparte has quitted Elba—has landed in France—and has been received with acclamation by the people! I mean also," he added, with a still stronger accentuation, "that King Louis has fled, and that Napoleon is again at the Tuileries!"

The consternation of all present at the royal breakfast-table may be more easily conceived than described; and while every one began delivering hurried comments upon the startling announcements just made, to the utter oblivion of all the substantials constituting the morning meal, Penelope seized the opportunity to whisper in the Prince's ear, "His Majesty's presentiment is fulfilled!"

"Yes," responded the Regent, now suddenly and forcibly struck by the words which were thus recalled to his mind and which his father had uttered in his wild ravings on the preceding night. "I remember—he spoke of Napoleon Bonaparte,—and the prophetic spirit which inspired him at the time has thus received a strange justification. But now, in spite of all that he uttered besides, we must have war again—aye, and plenty of it also!"

CHAPTER CXXX.

THE ERMINE CLOAK AND THE GREEN SILK HOOD.

We broke off the preceding chapter in a manner which many of our readers will doubtless deem abrupt: but we did so for the express purpose of avoiding any further comment, at least on that occasion, relative to the grand political changes and the frenzied succession of startling incidents which were about to occur upon the Continent. We deemed it sufficient to note in its proper place the receipt of the intelligence in England of the entrance of Napoleon into Paris; and we now resume the thread of our narrative.

Let us suppose a month to have elapsed since the occurrences last related; and we must again request the reader to turn his attention to the little Republic of Geneva. There also the news of Napoleon's return into France had been received: but as that meteor-man rolled on his rapid course without this time touching the Swiss Confederation or the democratic domain of Geneva, all fear speedily subsided in the latter, leaving only a sentiment of astonishment and curiosity behind. Yes—admiration of the courage, the genius, and the perseverence of the greatest hero the world ever saw; and curiosity to mark the issue of the new conflict thus provoked by single-handed France against all the allied powers of Europe!

A month then has passed since that conversation which took place between the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas at the former's lodging, in the city of Geneva: and now again shall we find them together, at that same place, and in earnest deliberation. But on this occasion it is about eight o'clock in the evening: the table is covered with wine and dessert—the window is open—and the zephyrs of April are wafted into the room. And it is because the double casements are thus unfolded that the Earl and Malpas are conversing together in low and almost whispering voices.

"Well, Curzon," said the Colonel; "what, after all, is to be done? I know that during our conference this evening, I have asked you that question at least a hundred times; but as you have given me no positive reply, I must e'en ask it again."

"The position of affairs is indeed most awkward," remarked the Earl. "Here is Lady Sackville writing the most urgent letters to insist that something shall be done——"

"And she writes exactly in the same tone to me," interrupted Malpas. "In fact, in her last letter, she more than hints her fears that I am either trifling or else actually playing a treacherous part in the matter."

"She addresses similar reproaches to me," rejoined the Earl. "Nay, more—she tells me in plain terms she will not believe me when I write and tell her that I am neither able to worm any secrets out of Julia, nor yet persuade her to run away with me."

"This is exactly the language which her ladyship uses towards me," said Malpas, "with the addition that she tells me unless I do something decided to crush or break up the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales, I may abandon the mission. In which case she warns me not to venture into her presence again as long as I live."

"She does not exactly speak in such strong language to me," observed the Earl of Curzon. "But she tells me quite as plainly that if I cannot bring matters to a speedy issue, she will not trouble me to prosecute the business any farther. Indeed, she declares that circumstances now render it absolutely necessary that the conspiracy should be broken up at once——"

"And yet how is it to be done!" asked Malpas. "Emma will bestow her favours upon me to my heart's content: but as for admitting me to her confidence with regard to anything that is going on, she only laughs gaily when I tell her that I know she *has* secrets and that she should reveal them all to me. Then, as for asking her to run away with me, she laughs still more heartily than ever—tells me I am a fool—pulls my whiskers—slaps my face, and says it will be high time for her to run off with me should she find that our amour is likely to bear fruit."

"I cannot say in respect to Julia that I have any pulling of the whiskers, slappings of the face, or merry peals of laughter," observed the Earl of Curzon: "but, on the other hand, I have plenty of sentimentalisms, tears, gentle reproaches, and tender caresses—partly assumed and partly real. For I know that the girl loves me on the one hand: but then she has a certain portion in this curious drama to enact on the other hand."

"I thought she faithfully promised that at the end of a month she would fly away with you," observed Malpas, "provided you would grant her that delay? And now the month is passed——"

"Yes—and last night we had a strange scene," said the Earl, in a tone of vexation.

"A strange scene!" ejaculated Malpas. "This puts me in mind of a scene which I have also had—with Emma, of course. It was the night before last: but

as I did not see you yesterday I could not mention it before—and our serious discourse of this evening had hitherto put it out of my head——"

"Then, as your adventure took place first," interrupted Curzon, "you shall have precedence in relating it. Come—fill your glass, and begin your narrative."

"It is short," responded the Colonel: then having helped himself to wine, he said, "The night before last—soon after eleven o'clock—I scaled the garden wall of the villa, according to previous appointment, and was immediately received in the arms of my Emma. If you were out at that time you will of course remember that the night was dark as pitch—not a star nor a glimpse of the moon being visible, and the heavens entirely overclouded. In fact, it was anything but a Swiss night. I do not recollect having ever been out in a darker one even in England in the middle of January: and this is the beautiful south of Europe, and the middle of April! Well, I could not therefore see my charming Emma: but I felt her warm kisses and heard the music of her voice: I therefore knew that it was she. Besides, who else could meet me at the place of appointment? who else be ready to guide me through the mazes of the garden, to that convenient little back-entrance into the villa, up that private staircase?"

"All of which I am well acquainted with," said Curzon, smiling. "But how was it that you had any misgivings as to the identity of the complaisant fair one who thus met you, with the fair and wanton Emma whom you expected?"

"I had such misgivings," answered the Colonel, "because as my fair companion hastily guided me through the garden, I felt that she had on some satin garment bordered with fur—and it instantaneously struck me——"

"Ah! and well you might have wondered!" ejaculated Curzon. "My adventure, I see, was pretty well the same as yours. But pray continue."

"I was instantly struck by the recollection, I say," resumed Malpas, "that the Princess of Wales was accustomed to wear a satin cloak ornamented with ermine! But this was not all. At the same time I remembered that her Royal Highness, when rambling in her garden or in the neighbourhood of the villa, of an evening, was accustomed to wear a dark green hood. Well, to my increasing amazement and terror I found that my companion not only had on the cloak bordered with ermine, but likewise a hood: and for the moment I trembled lest some fearful mistake had taken place. In fact, I was so terrified—or rather astounded—I could not speak: and we had reached the back-entrance into the building ere I could so far recover my presence of mind as to stop suddenly short and demand in a low voice, '*Are you really Emma Owen?*'—'*Yes, you silly fellow,*' she responded in the unmistakable accents of her gaily melodious voice: '*do you take me for a ghost?*'—I was now reassured as to the identity of my fair companion—and that was sufficient. We ascended the staircase, which, as you know, is always involved in darkness at night: and then we entered the passage from which all the principal rooms on the second storey open. A lamp, as you are of course aware, is always burning in that passage: and as we emerged from the darkness of the staircase into the light of the passage, I was struck with a sort of terror on observing that Emma not only wore a satin cloak bordered with ermine, but also a green hood so exactly like the cloak and hood of her Royal Highness that I felt convinced, if they were not the same, the imitation must have been purposely intended. At the same instant Emma drew the hood hastily over her countenance—seized me by the hand—and said in an impatient whisper, '*Come on, come on!*' All in a moment did a suspicion of the truth flash to my mind: I understood it all—or at least fancied I did;—and I was rendered speechless with mingled astonishment and anger. Then, to add to my bewilderment, a door at the farther end of the passage opened suddenly and a head was thrust forth. I rather think it was that of a female—but being instantaneously withdrawn again, and the door closing even more abruptly than it had opened, I could not form any certain opinion on that point. Emma at the same instant affected—for affectation only could it have been—to be suddenly seized with a perfect consternation. I supported her in my arms—and the next moment we were safe within her chamber. '*We have been observed,*' I said the moment the door was secured.—'*Oh! no, it is nothing,*' she replied.—'*Yes,*' I urged, '*it is indeed something. I saw a head peep forth; and you were frightened. Wherefore should you have been thus frightened if it were nothing!*'—'*Because I am nervous and you are full of terrors,* she answered as she flung off her splendid cloak and green hood.—'*Now,*' said I, '*tell me candidly why you have appropriated the costume of the Princess.*'—'*It is my own,*' she exclaimed: then after a moment's pause, she said with that bewitching archness of manner which renders her at times so truly ravishing, '*Do you not know, my dear Percy, that we ladies-in-waiting are honoured with the cast-off dresses of her Royal Highness?*' The explanation instantaneously struck me as being so feasible that I could not utter another word; and there the matter accordingly dropped. To make an end of this long story, I need only say that what with the blandishments, the caresses, and the delights experienced in Emma's arms, I soon forgot all about the satin cloak and the green hood—at least until the morning; and then indeed, on being seated alone at my breakfast-table, I reconsidered the matter, and very seriously too. With renewed force did the suspicion which had first struck me at the time, recur to my imagination: and I reflected upon the whole affair in all its bearings and every point of view."

"Well, and that suspicion?" said Curzon inquiringly. "In plain terms, what was the interpretation you put upon the matter?"

"That Miss Emma Owen," responded Malpas, "while gratifying her passion with me as her paramour, made the means of her own enjoyment subservient to the more worldly purposes which she has in view,—or to speak more plainly still, that she availed herself of the opportunity thus furnished to take a step calculated to damage the reputation of the Princess of Wales. By assuming her apparel it would be made to appear that it was her Royal Highness herself who thus introduced a paramour into the villa; and the head thrust forth from the room at the end of the passage, was that of the person who was to be the witness of her Royal Highness's presumed frailty. Such was my suspicion at the time—and such, on mature consideration, is my conviction now."

"The deduction you have made embraces a truth

which my own adventure positively confirms. Your's," continued the Earl of Curzon, "took place the night before last: mine occurred last night—and now I will relate it. It was shortly after eleven when, according to previous appointment, I entered the grounds of the villa, and was immediately folded in the loving embrace of the sentimental Julia. The moon last night was clear and beautiful, the aspect of the heavens being very different from that of the preceding night, the darkness of which you have so particularly alluded to. Well, on meeting Julia last night, I found her tender and sentimental as ever. She was dressed in a loose wrapper,—having thrown off the formal splendours of her evening-toilette. She is really a beauteous creature; and as the moonbeams, with all the power of their argentine lustre sublimated as it were to a still purer and chaster brilliancy by the reflection of the snow which crowns the mountain-tops, shone upon the figure of my Julia, it seemed to me at the time as if I had seldom gazed upon a creature so sweetly beautiful and so tenderly captivating! And though I could not help thinking that half her sentimentalism was naught but affectation, and therefore downright hypocrisy, I could not help loving her—I could not help straining her passionately in my arms—so true it is that a beautiful mistress, even though known to be an unprincipled wanton and full of duplicity, often wields a power with her seductive blandishments which a wife can never exercise. However, I am not going to sermonise upon this point: I have already said enough for you to understand that Julia looked indescribably lovely—that her caresses were unusually tender—and that I was maudlin loving. Therefore, although my original intention was not to accompany her to her own chamber unless she was prepared to give me her solemn pledge to fly with me within a day or two, I suffered her to lead me towards the back-entrance; and the next moment the door closed behind us and we were ascending in the darkness of the private staircase. On reaching the first landing, where, as I need scarcely tell you, there is no light at all, Julia hastily whispered that I should pause for a moment;—and then I heard the rustling of silk or satin, as if she were putting on some garment which lay ready to her hand on the table of that landing. I had not time to form any conjecture upon the subject: for the next instant she took me by the hand and led me on again. In a few moments we reached the summit of the next flight, and then emerged into the passage where the lamp burns at night. Ah! conceive my astonishment, mingled with shame and rage, when, as the beams of that lamp suddenly shone upon her, I observed that she was enveloped in a satin cloak bordered with ermine, and that she wore upon her head a dark hood which was drawn forward so as entirely to conceal her countenance. An ejaculation escaped my lips: but she seized my arm with convulsive violence;—and at the same moment a door opened at the end of the passage—doubtless the same one whence you had seen the head peep forth on the preceding night. But on this occasion it was not merely a head, but an entire form that came forth from that door: and as well as I could observe, it was an elderly female—most probably one of the English menials belonging to the household. On catching sight of my companion she instantly retreated, closing the door hurriedly. At the same instant Julia dragged me forward into her own chamber;—and fastening the door, she immediately flung off the cloak and the hood—precipitating herself into my arms, and endeavouring to drown my recollections in the flood of bliss which her kisses, her toyings, and her dalliances poured upon me. But I was not to be thus appeased. The whole truth of the manœuvre which had just taken place, was transparent as daylight. I read it all—I saw that I had been suddenly rendered a means of compromising her Royal Highness in the gravest and most serious manner; and I felt furiously indignant as well as deeply humiliated to think that Julia should have succeeded in making me her agent, her tool, and her instrument for such a purpose. But still I dared not suffer her to read all that was passing in my mind: I was careful not to say anything to make her suspect that I had a secret mission to protect and succour the Princess, instead of helping to ruin her. Therefore, subduing the real state of my feelings as well as I was able, I said, '*Julia, wherefore that disguise which you ere now assumed?*'—'*Simply to avoid the chance of detection,*' she at once answered.—'*But,*' said I, '*do not that cloak and hood belong to the Princess!*'—'*No,*' she responded with unblushing effrontery: '*they are mine. You are aware,*' she immediately added, '*that in my capacity I receive a share of her Royal Highness's left-off apparel.*'—'*But,*' I still urged, '*was it not sheer madness or else the deepest wickedness thus to assume such a disguise at such an hour and under such circumstances?*' Julia thereupon burst into tears—admitting that she had been very thoughtless indeed, but beseeching that I would think no more of it. I knew of course that she was now playing the hypocrite, and that her duplicity was unredeemed by any softer feeling, notwithstanding the caresses she continued to lavish upon me. I accordingly reminded her in a severe tone, that some female issuing from the room at the end of the passage, had just observed us. '*Oh!*' she exclaimed, '*it was merely Mrs. Hubbard, the English laundress belonging to the household; and she will not say a word.*'—I asked her how she was so confident that Mrs. Hubbard would keep the secret, reminding her that the impression made upon the woman must have been that it was the Princess herself, the wife of England's Regent, whom she had thus observed in the act of introducing a paramour into the villa. Julia had her answer ready. '*Yes,*' she said, '*I know all that; and it is precisely because Mrs. Hubbard must think it was the Princess that the secret will be kept.*' She then proceeded to tell me, with an air of the tenderest confidence, and with many injunctions that I would not repeat her averments, that her Royal Highness not only carries on a criminal intrigue with her principal equerry, Baron Bergami, but that she admits other paramours into the villa—not a syllable of all which did I believe. '*Mrs. Hubbard,*' continued Julia, '*is in the Princess's confidence; and therefore it cannot make matters worse if she just now mistook me for her Royal Highness. At all events,*' added Julia, '*you surely cannot be angry that I should adopt, for the purpose of saving my own reputation, a precaution which in its consequences cannot damage the reputation of the Princess more than it is already injured in the estimation of all her household.*'"

"What answer did you make to this precious sophistry?" inquired Malpas.

"What *could* I say?" exclaimed Curzon. "It would have seemed singular indeed to Julia for me to be more tender about the reputation of the Princess than of her own. Leaving, therefore, that subject, I reminded her that the month's delay for which she had stipulated was now passed, and that she must make up her mind either to fly away with me or remain at Geneva without me. Then came plenty of entreaties, remonstrances, excuses, evasions, and tears. But I gave her positively to understand that I would play this hide-and-seek game no longer. We had a scene, the details of which I need scarcely enter into: suffice it to say, that at daybreak this morning I parted from Julia with nothing understood—nothing agreed upon. In fact, I see perfectly well that she considers me a mere instrument in her hands—a paramour to gratify her sensualities, and a cat's-paw in the carrying out of the conspiracy wherein she and her sisters are engaged."

"Your adventure, Curzon," said Malpas, "proves that the two sisters, Emma and Julia, are acting entirely in concert. Even with regard to ourselves they have no secrets from each other. I mean, it is evident that Emma knows of the amour Julia is carrying on with you, and that Julia is aware of the intrigue Emma is carrying on with me."

"But it is also evident," remarked the Earl, "that they do not entertain the slightest suspicion that you and I ever meet—much less that we compare notes of all that is passing. Our real mission at Geneva is therefore unsuspected by them: they look upon us as mere gallants tied to their petticoat strings, and dream not that our real aim is to break up the conspiracy in which they are engaged."

"Heaven only knows what they do suspect and what they don't!" exclaimed Malpas. "Such duplicity, such artifice, such hypocrisy I never knew before. That they have no secrets from each other, is clear from the adoption of the same stratagem concerning the cloak and hood, and also from the utterance of the same identical excuse about being entitled to her Royal Highness's cast-off clothing——"

"And the same facts prove," interjected Curzon, "that they do not dream of you and me meeting and comparing notes."

"Just so," rejoined Malpas. "But it is of no use wasting precious time in mere comment. Very certain is it that so far from you and me having done any thing to break up the conspiracy, we actually find ourselves inveigled as it were into it—and instead of counteracting the designs and proceedings of those young ladies, we have positively and literally become their dupes. Again, therefore, do I ask you what is to be done?"

"There is only one thing which I can see," responded Curzon, with the air of a man who suddenly makes up his mind to the adoption of a course on which he has previously been deliberating.

"And what is that?" inquired Malpas.

"Look you," resumed the Earl, without immediately answering the question. "For my part, I am resolved not to remain in the position of the mere hide-and-seek gallant of a Court lady, receiving her favours as a great boon, and incurring the risk of becoming her dupe again and again. I am moreover anxious to take some decisive step at once, in order to convince Lady Sackville that I have *not* been idle or inactive: and lastly, I am anxious to get back to England as soon as possible, for fear lest Napoleon, now that he is once again in France, should so effectually seal up every means of return, alike by land and sea, that we stand a chance of being made prisoners of war, no matter to what part of Europe we may retire."

"All these considerations weigh equally with me," observed Colonel Malpas: "and I am therefore ready to adopt any plan you may suggest. What project have you in view?"

"To carry off the sisters Emma and Julia by main force," answered the Earl of Curzon, in a decisive tone.

"Yes—that is indeed the best mode of procedure!" exclaimed Malpas. "But you and I cannot accomplish the affair alone and unassisted——"

"Of course not," interrupted Curzon. "I have not merely reflected well upon this matter, but have even gone so far as to make certain preliminary arrangements. I will explain how. One night—I dare say it must have been five weeks ago—I was rambling on the banks of the lake, when suddenly turning the angle of the old jetty or pier, I came most unexpectedly upon three men who were dragging something out of the water. It was a dead body—the corpse of a sailor who had been drowned a day or two previously, and for which these men had been fishing. At least, such was the account they gave me. I remained through curiosity to converse with them and watch their proceedings. But presently I found that I was one too many on that spot; and it struck me, from the ominous nature of the looks which they threw upon me in the clear moonlight, and from the curt answers they gave to my questions, that I was interfering with some object they had in view. I accordingly bade them '*good night*,' and sauntered away: but concealing myself behind the pier, I watched their movements. One of them went and fetched a horse and cart from a thicket where the equipage had previously been concealed. They then placed the body in the cart, and sped away towards the city. Urged on by an irresistible feeling of curiosity, I followed them at a convenient distance, the sounds of their vehicle enabling me to pursue the direction which they took. To be brief, I followed the party until they reached a house in a low neighbourhood. A lamp burning over the door, indicated that it was a doctor's; and from the deep shade of the adjacent dwellings I could see what was going on. The body was taken into the doctor's house: two of the men immediately afterwards went away with the cart—and the third issued forth in a few minutes. I then understood how my presence on the shore of the lake had proved somewhat embarrassing to those three scoundrels, whose evident occupation was the fishing up of drowned men, not for the purpose of Christian burial, but for the dissecting-room."

"Well," observed Malpas, "I cannot possibly see what all this has got to do with our present business."

"I have not quite finished my story," replied Lord Curzon. "A few days ago, when I found the month's delay drawing to a close and saw little chance of Julia's consenting to fly with me, the idea of carrying her off by force first struck me;

and I felt persuaded that you would not hesitate to adopt the same course with regard to Emma. I accordingly went down for another moonlight ramble on the shores of the lake: and there, according to my expectation, I found the fishers of men. For a boat had been upset in the morning by a sudden squall; and three or four persons were drowned. '*Where the carrion is, the crows will be found,*' says the proverb. So it was in this case. I accosted the men at once—disarmed them of hostility by putting gold into their hands—and then frankly and fearlessly told them that I knew they were three desperadoes, and that it was quite probable I should need their services in some desperate adventure. To be brief—without explaining to them what the nature of the service might be, I retained them with liberal fees for any night and for any enterprise I may choose to name: and you may depend upon it, Malpas, that we shall find three able coadjutors in Kobolt the Genevese, Hernani the Italian, and Walden the Switzer."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Malpas. "The affair is already as good as settled. Now let us discuss all the details."

But we need not follow the Colonel and the nobleman in the arrangement of their plans: we shall therefore leave them for the present, while we direct the attention of the reader elsewhere.

CHAPTER CXXXI.

THE GOSSIPS.

In the preceding chapter we have spoken more than once of a long passage, or corridor, whence opened the principal sleeping apartments in the villa occupied by her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales: and we have likewise stated that from a certain room at the end of this passage some female had observed the proceedings of Malpas and Curzon with their paramours. We will now introduce our readers into the apartment thus alluded to, and likewise to the two persons whom we shall find there at the time.

The room itself was modestly furnished, in a manner evidently intended for the occupation of a menial dependant. It was nevertheless perfectly comfortable, and admirably clean. It had a window looking upon the grounds at the back; and a staircase in one corner led up to a large laundry overhead.

As Julia had informed Curzon, this room we have just described was in the occupation of Mrs. Hubbard, the laundress of the household. She was an elderly woman—tall in stature, lank in form, and precise in dress. The angular outlines of her countenance, the peering sharpness and restlessness of her eyes, and the very accents of her voice, denoted the lover of scandal and the inveterate gossip as well as the consummate hypocrite. She had been two or three years in the household of the Princess; and by carrying favour with every body in a wily insidious manner, had contrived to make herself tolerably well liked—although it only needed a little study of her physiognomy to prove that she was a woman most dangerous to be trusted and impossible to be relied on.

Upon the present occasion Mrs. Hubbard was receiving a visit from an English friend who had arrived at Geneva. This was a Mrs. Dakin, occupying the position of housekeeper to Sir Clubley Spokes, an eccentric old baronet, who was very fond of travelling about, and who in his tours was attended by a retinue of half-a-dozen servants. Mrs. Dakin was likewise an elderly person—as much given to gossip and scandal as her friend Mrs. Hubbard—and devotedly attached to a drop of ardent spirit, although she never would admit that she took it otherwise than medicinally.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, on the day following the conversation recorded in the preceding chapter, that the worthy Mrs. Dakin thus paid her respects to her amiable and excellent friend Mrs. Hubbard. After the first greetings had taken place, Mrs. Hubbard, like the "old mother" in the nursery-legend, went to her cupboard. It was not, however, to get a bone for her dog, seeing that she had no dog at all to take care of—but it was to bring forth the brandy bottle for herself and her friend. But all the while she was thus producing the "creature comfort," she went on talking in an abstracted manner, upon the weather, the beauty of the lake, the snow of the distant mountains, and other matters equally interesting, while Mrs. Dakin vouchsafed her answers and volunteered her comments with all the appearance of one totally unconscious of the temptation which was thus being placed in her way. Then Mrs. Hubbard returned to the cupboard; and on this occasion it was to procure a couple of wine glasses, which she placed upon the table; and while still discoursing upon a variety of indifferent topics she filled up the two glasses with the potent fluid. Mrs. Dakin was now intent upon looking out of the window, as if perfectly unsuspicious, poor soul! of the dreadful conspiracy thus going on against any habit of teetotalism which she might be inclined to practise—though heaven can attest that it the redness on the tip of the nose be taken as any criterion in the matter, it was very little teetotalism indeed that entered within the sphere of worthy Mrs. Dakin's daily habits.

"Deary me, Mrs. Hubbard, whatever have you bin an' done?" now ejaculated worthy Mrs. Dakin, holding up her hands and turning up her eyes in apparent dismay as she caught sight of the two glasses filled to the brim. "Wal, I never did see such a dear, inticin', insiniwatin', coaxin', captiwatin' creatur' as you air in all my born days."

"Come, Mrs. Dakin dear," said Mrs. Hubbard, assuming a tone and look of bland entreaty; "I am aweer that your habits is sober-iety itself and that you never touches nothink short or warm afore dinner; but on such a occasion as this—ven two friends as is friends, and rale friends too, meets after a long separation and in a furrin land, amung a passel of selvidges as one may say, to whom our blessed mother-tongue is altogether unbeknown—I do think, under such circumstances," added the royal laundress persuasively, "you may take a leetle drop jest to rinse your mouth——"

"Wal, dear," observed Mrs. Dakin; "jest to wash the dust out, as you so poethetically expresses it. And after all," continued the worthy dame, as she took a long gasp of pleasure when she had drained the glass,—"after all, there is wuss things in the world than a drop of that fiery stuff—

though heavins knows I never do touch it eggsept as a meddisin."

"And I'm sure, my dear," resumed Mrs. Hubbard, with a gloomy shake of her head, "that it rekvires a leetle of this meddisin to keep up one's sperrets while fur away from hold Hingland with its white cl ffis——"

"Oh! that it do, my dear," said Mrs. Dakin, thrusting her pocket-handkerchief into the corner of her eye, so as to appear deeply affected. "I don't know how it be, but so it is, that I can't abear to be away from my natif Halbion, although I were born on board a ship far away in the Vest Ingies."

"Was you though?" exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard, as if quite astounded. "Wal, I've knowed you now seventeen year, this last fust of Aperil—I mind it was a Aperil when we was interdooced, 'cos it was on All Fools' Day, at dear Mrs. Humby's which kept the *Boar and Cauliflower*—you remember——"

"In course I remember," cried Mrs. Dakin, her features brightening up with the pleasant reminiscences of earlier days. "Wal, and that was seventeen year ago—so it were! Lor, how time does fly. What a queer thing time is to be sure! But tal me, my dear, how do you like bein' in furrin' parts——"

"Don't ax me, Mrs. Dakin," cried the laundress; "I can't abear it! I look upon all furriners as a passel of reskels—and now that the sassy feller Boningparty has got back into France——"

"Ah! deary me," groaned Mrs. Dakin, "the bare hidear of what will happen to us all is more than enough to give one the collyrer morbis!" and she threw a desperate longing glance at the brandy bottle.

"Heavins!" you don't mean for to go for to say that you're so narvous and eggsited as all that?" exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard, very prudently replenishing the glasses. "Come—take it quick, my dear—or you 'll go off into a fit of relapse! But I won't talk no more about Boningparty and what he may do to us all, since it perduces such a heffect upon you," added Mrs. Hubbard soothingly, as Mrs. Dakin poured the dram down her throat and indulged in another long sigh of pleasure. "Let's talk of our sitiwations. Tal me, are you comfortable in your'n?"

"Pretty wal," responded Mrs. Dakin: "nothink wery perticklar to complain on—and then, I raypher think," she added, with a mysterious look and low whisper,—"I raypher think Sir Clubley has put my name in his will——"

"Do you though?" exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard. "I coggratelate you, my dear—that I do! He seems such a nice old gentleman——"

"Oh! not him, he's so peewish and quarrelsome!" cried Mrs. Dakin, sharply.

"Wal, I thought he looked like it, my dear," observed the laundress, with a mournful shake of the head.

"And then he's so mean," exclaimed Mrs. Dakin, her virtuous indignation gradually rising. "He keeps the key of the caddie——"

"The willin'!" ejaculated Mrs. Hubbard, in sincere yet savage sympathy with her old friend.

"And he adds up all his bills," continued Mrs Dakin.

"Wal, I never!" said the laundress, in dismay.

"And he counts the wine-bottles."

"Wuss and wuss," groaned Mrs. Hubbard.

"And he actiwally keeps a list of his own linen."

"Arter that, I'm done!" murmured the royal laundress, who evidently could not find words sufficiently strong to express her indignation at the conduet of Sir Clubley Spokes, while she regarded Mrs. Dakin as the most injured woman in the world.

In fact, so very affecting and so pathetically interesting was the present scene, that when Mrs. Hubbard again filled the glasses, Mrs. Dakin drank off her dram without a word of comment, much less a murmur of remonstrance—so deep was the abstraction of her thoughts.

"Wal," said Mrs. Hubbard at length, "I've heerd of wild beastesses that tears the hinnocent lambs limb from limb—I've heerd of savage Ingins which preys upon human flesh, roast or biled—but I never heerd of such owdacious cruelty as that which this Sir Tubley Stokes, or leastways whatever his name be, is a practysing on you."

"Wal, it is too bad—a deal too bad," said Mrs. Dakin, again inflaming her riglft optic with the square fuot of cambric which she carried in her hand. "But how do *you* get on, my dear? You seem to have a nice berth of it——"

"Pritty good, pritty good," ejaculated Mrs. Hubbard: then, after pursing up her mouth in a very mysterious manner, she said, "The wages is good—the pervisions is good—and there isn't no stint of liquor, eether wine, beer, or brandy. But——"

And the worthy laundress, stopping suddenly short, shook her head with dark and sinister meaning.

"Wal, whatever is the matter?" asked Mrs. Dakin. "Do you feel hill, my dear—do you feel hill?"

"Y-e-s," murmured the laundress faintly, and sinking back in her chair, as if overpowered by the unutterable nature of her thoughts.

"Heavins! she'll swoon—she'll swoon!" shrieked Mrs. Dakin, awfully excited: and she filled up the two glasses. "Here, my walooed friend—the meddisin!"

"You're too kind!" groaned the laundress: and having allowed Mrs. Dakin to pour the brandy down her throat, she thought it expedient to recover.

"Well, what is it now?" asked Mrs. Dakin, in a tone of friendly confidence. "Come, tal me what it is that hails you. Summut the matter with the place—eh? Wal, I thought so. Is it the tea and sugar?"

"No—I've enow of both."

"Is it the goin' out on a Sunday?"

"No—I can go out and come in when I likes, purvided I does my work. It isn't *that!*"

"Then is it '*no follerers*'?" asked Mrs. Dakin.

"Not that, neether, dear," was the mournful response.

"Then what in heavin's name be it?" inquired Sir Clubley Spokes's housekeeper, terribly perplexed.

"It's the—morals!" gasped Mrs. Hubbard, as if with the last effort of expiring nature: but almost immediately rallying with a groan, she looked her companion very hard in the face for upwards of three minutes.

"The morals?" echoed the housekeeper: then, drawing her chair close up to that of Mrs. Hubbard, she said in a hushed tone and with that earnestness of manner which only real gossips and scandal-mongers can possibly assume, "Whatever do you mean, dear? Tal me what you mean?"

"I mean, my buzzim friend," responded the laundress, shaking her head very, very lugubriously indeed, "that it is a wery vicked vorld, and full of all sorts of hintrigues: but no place in all this vorld so vicked is half so vicked as this here villa. It is the wussest, dear—the wussest!"

"Gracious goodness me!" murmured Mrs. Dakin, holding up her hands in awful consternation. "Who'd have thought it?"

"The goin's on is dreadful!" continued Mrs. Hubbard.

"Well, I'm not supprised," observed Mrs. Deakin: "for my old master is the greatest reskel and willin vith the vimen I ever did come near. He can't let *me* alone!"

"And I'm sure there's a certing personidge under this roof as can't let the men alone," proceeded Mrs. Hubbard. "Yes, my dear, vun of our own sex, and more shame for her, which can't keep in her proper spear, but demeans herself with a passel of fellers—adwenturers and good for nothinks, I suppose——"

"But who on earth do you allude to, my dear?" asked Mrs. Dakin, intensely and thrillingly interested in her friend's discourse.

"I alludes to one which ought to be a eggsample of morality and wertew, instead of sinking down into a gulf of degradation! I allude, my old friend—and I know your buzzim will throb when I tal you—I allude to her Ryal Ighness the Princess of Vales."

"No!" exclaimed the housekeeper, throwing up her arms, and keeping them up, too, in utter dismay. "You can't—you don't—you niver would——"

"I means what I says," rejoined the laundress, sharply: "you never knowed me tal a lie in all my life—and I wouldn't to save myself from death or the workus. No, not I! And so I repeat, the goin's-on in this 'ouse is dreadful! Why, the Princess is a perfect rake—a reglar demirep. I never see such things! It was dear Mrs. Ranger as fust opened my heyes to what was going on. A dear good soul is that Mrs. Ranger—and sweet nice gals is them she brought into the ryal 'ousehold some foo months ago. Heavin send that they may egsoape contermination!"

"Is the Princess so very bad, then?" asked Mrs. Dakin: "I thought she was such a matron-like, honest-looking, open-countenanced lady——"

"She!" almost shrieked Mrs. Hubbard: "she is a regular out and out bad un as ever was! Why, she carries on her hintrigues with a unblushing boldness. There is Bigamy, the he-query as they call him, goes openly to her chamber——I've sin him—yes, I've sin him! Mrs. Ranger has bin and put me on the watch to look out for him. Then as for other lovyers—why, the Princess has a dozen! 'Twas on'y three nights ago, Mrs. Ranger came and put me on the look out. *She* suspected summut wrong was a goin' on—and she was right too! So every now and then, when I thought I heerd a footstep, I peeps out—and presently, lo and behold ye! there was the Princess with her vermin cloak and her green hood on, a-bringing in a lovyer along the passidge to her own room! Oh! it was too bad——"

"Too bad indeed!" observed Mrs. Dakin, drawing her chair still closer, and feeling so deeply interested in the present topic that even the brandy-bottle itself was lost sight of. "Wal, what nixt?"

"What nixt?" echoed Mrs. Hubbard: then suddenly lowering her voice to a mysterious whisper, she said, "I'll tal you, my dear, what nixt! Why, the Princess is——"

"No!" ejaculated Mrs. Dakin, in dismay.

"Yes!" returned Mrs. Hubbard, dogmatically.

"You flabbergast me!" said the former.

"I'm flabbergasted myself," rejoined the latter.

"But however did this come beknown to you?" inquired Mrs. Dakin.

"In the fust place," answered the laundress, "I've got heyes—and in the second place I've got hears."

"But is it so wery appearant?" asked Mrs. Dakin.

"No, you can't see any out'ard and wisible sign," responded Mrs. Hubbard. "But Mrs. Ranger is in the secret—and she has showed me all the babby-linnen—and she has told me how everythink is settled, the doctor engaged, the child a-ready provided for even afore 'tis born——"

"Lork-a-daisy me!" murmured Mrs. Dakin, with divers ominous shakes of the head. "And who is the doctor?"

"One Vermicelli, I think the name be," answered Mrs. Hubbard. "But it's all jist as I tell you, my dear—and though dear good Mrs. Ranger comes in now and then, quite permiscuous like, to take a leetle drop of brandy and have a few minnits gossip, I wouldn't for all the world betray the confidence she imposes in me——"

"Not for the world—oh! dearey me, no!" ejaculated Mrs. Dakin. "You may rely on me keepin' all you've told me as profound a secret as if so be it was writ in a letter and sinked with a stone to the bottom of a well. But doesn't the ryal ladies subspect what a condition their missus is in?"

"Not they, poor dear hinnocent lambkins!" exclaimed Mrs. Hubbard. "There's the three Miss Owens—quite patterns of wirtew and perpriety—what can they know? Then there's the other three ladies-in-waitin', a leetle holder than the Owens, but every bit as moral. No—there's on'y Mrs. Ranger in the secret—and this Doctor Marmajelly, or whatsomever his name raly be."

"Wal, my dear friend," said Mrs. Dakin, "you have supprised me with a wengeance. Goings-on indeed! Who could have fancied it? And yet, betwixt you and me and the bed-post, I *always* did take her Ryal 'Ighness for a queer creatur'—and I ain't a bit supprised at what I've heerd, when I come to think on it. It's jest as I thought and no more than I subspected."

In this manner did the two gossips continue to discourse; but ere they separated, the glasses were refilled and drained, in order, as Mrs. Hubbard very properly expressed herself, to "cool down their eggsited feelins' after the handlin' of

THE PRINCESS OF WALES AND HER LADIES.

such rousin' topics." Nor did they take leave of each other without a promise on the part of the royal laundress to keep a close watch on everything that might take place within the walls of the villa, so as to glean fresh food for a cozie gossip the next time Mrs. Dakin should "chance to drop in upon her."

CHAPTER CXXXII.

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT.—ACT THE FIRST.

It was about ten o'clock at night—and the sky was covered with dark clouds which were borne swiftly along upon the wings of a strong wind. Every now and then the moonbeams shone forth for a few moments, from amidst those sombre and variable curtains which nature had stretched over the empyrean arch; but during the intervals when the planet of the night was veiled behind those clouds, a total darkness prevailed in Geneva and the surrounding country.

Though in the middle of April, it was a tempestuous night; and the immense lake was lashed by the wind into rolling billows, so that the sound of its murmurings, moanings, and plashings, might be heard to a considerable distance. Altogether it was such a night that no person would care to be abroad unless on urgent business or in pursuit of those evil avocations which were congenial with the hour and the darkness: and yet a female form was proceeding rapidly along that narrow road which ran through the fields at the back of the villa.

Closely enveloped in her capacious mantle, and with a thick veil drawn over her countenance, Mrs. Ranger it was whom we find thus daring the inclemency of the night. Quick was her pace as she proceeded in the direction of the city, on gaining the streets of which she at once took

the nearest way to the abode of Dr. Maravelli. This individual, in consequence of certain intimations received from Mrs. Ranger, had been holding himself in readiness for three or four days past to be summoned at a moment's notice on the secret and delicate business for which he had been duly retained. Mrs. Ranger therefore found him at home and prepared to accompany her forthwith.

Before they set out, however, Mrs. Ranger bound a silk handkerchief over the doctor's eyes: then, with every appearance of the most solemn earnestness, she said, "I now adjure you, by the oath you have already taken, not to move this bandage from your eyes, nor allow it to shift its position without at once informing me!"

"I repeat the oath I have previously given you," said the doctor. "No sentiment of idle curiosity ever animates me. Besides, apart from this bandage, the blackness of the night is such that if the clue were once lost to the route we are about to take, it would be impossible to distinguish or recognise any specific locality, even were I not blindfolded at all."

Mrs. Ranger made no response; but taking the doctor's hand, she led him forth from his house. On emerging thence, she conducted him up one street and down another, so that he might at least *believe* that she was sincere in her expressed desire that he should remain utterly in the dark as to his ultimate destination. On the other hand, Dr. Maravelli, in spite of his repudiation of any undue curiosity, had all along resolved to ascertain, if possible, not only the house to which he was to be taken, but also who his patient might be. That she was a lady of rank he had naturally concluded, not only from the apparent pains taken to hush up the consequences of her frailty, but also from the liberality with which he was paid for his services. Being a thoroughly unprincipled man—greedily avaricious on the one hand, and an inveterate gambler on the other—his fingers were ever itching for the contact of that precious coin which, by a strange idiosyncrasy, he would lavish again in profusion at the gaming-table. His profession was eminently lucrative: but his habits made him ever needy; and thus, although well paid to keep his oath inviolate in the present instance, he nevertheless from the very first made up his mind to penetrate it if possible, so that when the honour of his fair patient was placed at his mercy he might avail himself of the secret for future extortions.

The reader has now obtained a full insight into the character of Dr. Maravelli. But it must not be thought that Mrs. Ranger herself was entirely ignorant on the same head. No such thing. When her artfully pursued researches for a doctor first brought Maravelli's name to her knowledge, she made the fullest inquiries into his character; and thence was it she ascertained, as we have heard her inform Agatha, that he was just the very person suited for the aims they had in view. Thus was Mrs. Ranger well aware that the doctor *would* endeavour to penetrate the present mystery; and it was entirely in accordance with her own secret plan that he *should* do so—that is to say, to a certain extent. Had she been *really* serious in her expressed desire to prevent him from ascertaining whither he was now being led, she would not have contented herself with merely fastening a bandage over his eyes and binding him by oath not to remove it. She would have taken some other steps and have multiplied her precautions, so as to ensure the effectual maintenance of the mystery.

However, to continue the thread of our narrative, we may observe that the doctor, believing Mrs. Ranger to be positively sincere in all her precautions, laughed in his sleeve at the idea of being simply blindfolded and then led up and down two or three streets, as if a man who had dwelt all his life in Geneva could not follow by memory alone the windings and turnings along which he was thus conducted. But even if he felt any doubt upon this subject, he had only to raise the bandage from his eyes very stealthily with one hand while Mrs. Ranger led him by the other; and in one of those intervals when the moon darted forth its beams from behind a cloud, could he distinguish the route by which he was being conducted.

Not a word was spoken between Mrs. Ranger and the doctor while she was guiding him up and down three or four streets, as already observed: but when she had led him out of the city and they were proceeding hand in hand along the road through the fields, Maravelli broke the silence by saying, "And so, madam, the crisis has at length come?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Ranger: "my friend, the lady in whom I am so deeply interested, was siezed with all the premonitory symptoms of approaching maternity soon after nine o'clock this evening; and judging from the experience which I myself have had in those matters, I think I can safely promise that you will not be detained long at the house to which I am about to conduct you, but that all will be over in a very short time."

A few more observations in a similar strain passed between Mrs Ranger and the doctor: but it is not worth while to record them. We must however observe that as they were proceeding along the road, Maravelli raised the bandage, and by the light of the transient moonbeams discovered the path which they were pursuing. He immediately suspected that he was being led to the villa: he knew that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales dwelt with her suite at that place; and if his patient were indeed an inmate of those walls, he could well understand wherefore the utmost pains should be adopted to hush the matter up.

On reaching the garden-wall which looked upon the road, Mrs. Ranger immediately opened the private door by means of a key which she had with her; and conducting the doctor inside the enclosure, she said in a low but impressive whisper, "Not a word—not a syllable—every possible precaution is now needful!"

Maravelli pressed her hand significantly, as much as to imply that she had no need to apprehend any thoughtlessness on his part; and while she conducted him through the garden, another glimpse stealthily obtained from under the bandage, showed him it was indeed within the precincts of the villa that he had been introduced. Delighted at the adventure, Maravelli inwardly resolved that it should prove a profitable one for him.

The back entrance into the villa was now reached; and Mrs. Ranger led the doctor up that private staircase which has been already more than once alluded to in preceding chapters. The pas-

sage on the second storey was speedily reached; and as Mrs. Ranger hurried Maravelli along, a door at the end was noiselessly opened, and a head was thrust forth. This was Mrs. Hubbard, whose listening ears had caught the sounds of footsteps, slight and scarcely audible though they were; but the instant she thus looked forth to satisfy her curiosity, Mrs. Ranger made a rapid gesture with the hand, and the laundress accordingly retreated into her chamber, closing the door as gently as possible.

The next moment Mrs. Ranger conducted the doctor into the apartment occupied by Agatha Owen.

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Here we must interrupt the thread of our narrative for the moment, in order to explain certain details with which it is necessary to make the reader acquainted.

It was eleven o'clock—about a quarter of an hour after Mrs. Ranger and Maravelli had entered the villa—when a post-chaise, drawn by four horses, issued forth from Geneva by that same secluded road which ran through the fields, and which has been so frequently mentioned in recent chapters. On arriving within about a hundred yards of the villa, the equipage stopped; and three men leapt forth from the interior. Bidding the postillions wait patiently, they proceeded on foot along the road until they reached the boundary-wall of the garden; and then stopping short, they appeared to expect some arrival which was to guide their next proceedings.

In a few minutes the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas arrived on horseback; and dismounting from their animals, they fastened the bridles to the bough of a tree at a distance of about fifty yards from the villa.

The nobleman and the Colonel were enveloped in travelling cloaks, and seemed prepared for a somewhat lengthy journey during the night. Without delay—the moment they dismounted from their steeds—they repaired to the spot where the three individuals already mentioned were waiting; and we may at once observe that these persons were none others than the fishers of men—Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden.

"You are punctual," said the Earl, immediately addressing them in a low tone and speaking in the French language. "This looks business-like."

"You will find the whole matter conducted as nicely, as noiselessly, and as expeditiously as you could wish," responded Kobolt. "Show us where it is likely the fair ones will be in a few minutes—and leave the rest to us."

"Here," said the Earl of Curzon, indicating a particular part of the wall against which stood the stump of a tree, as was revealed to the eyes of the three men by the moonbeams which shot forth at the instant: "this is where you would do well to scale the barrier and enter the inclosure. The lady will be walking in one of the avenues close by: but the moment she hears the sounds of footsteps she will hasten towards you. Then seize upon her—gag her—reck not for her struggles or resistance——"

"Aye, aye," said Kobolt: "we understand all that. Leave us to manage the carrying-off part of the business. Now, sir," he added, turning towards Colonel Malpas, "which part of the grounds are we to enter for *your* lady?"

"We must proceed a little farther on," answered Malpas: then having led the way to a point below the garden door, he said, "Here—this is the place—and I have only to repeat the same instructions which my comrade has already given you: namely, that the moment the lady accosts you, which she will do, you must pounce upon her, and seal her lips with your hand——"

"But no unnecessary violence with either," interjected the Earl of Curzon. "No damage to the sweet lips and the beautiful teeth——"

"Trust us—we will be as gentle as lambs in carrying off the fair ones," interrupted Kobolt. "No farther instructions are necessary. We know what to do. You can mount your horses, and away with you on the road to Lausanne. In less than a quarter of an hour we shall be on the same track, with the ladies in the carriage——that is to say, provided they keep the appointments, as you, gentlemen, have stated."

"There is no fear of it," remarked the Earl of Curzon. "At all events, I can safely answer for one."

"And I for the other," rejoined Malpas.

The nobleman and the Colonel now left the three desperadoes to execute the work entrusted to them; and returning to the spot where they had left their horses, they remounted the animals, and galloping away, took the broad open road leading along the shore of the crescent-shaped lake towards Lausanne.

CHAPTER CXXXIII.

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT.—ACT THE SECOND.

We must now peep into the bed-chamber belonging to Miss Emma Owen: and there, at about the same time the preceding incidents were taking place, we shall find that young lady and her sister Julia in close and earnest conference together.

They were seated together upon a sofa; and the wax candles, which stood upon the elegant toilette-table, shed their light upon the animated countenances of the two sisters and were reflected in their sparkling eyes. Having laid aside the handsome dresses which constituted the evening costume fitted for the dining-table and drawing-room of their royal mistress, they had put on loose wrappers, the negligence of which and the soft abandonment of the whole form which they seemed to indicate, invested these lovely but dissolute girls with an air of voluptuous langour. Nevertheless their features, as we have just observed, were animated with the glow of excitement and with a certain agitation of the feelings.

"This is truly provoking, Emma," said the sentimental Julia. "What is to be done?"

"My dear girl, I have already told you," returned her sister, with a laugh, "that we must deprive ourselves of the company of our lovers for this night. When we made each our respective appointments, we did not foresee that Agatha would so soon——But, no matter—you know, Julia, what we have to do—and Mrs. Ranger may come every moment to fetch us. Therefore we

must be here in readiness to attend her summons without a single instant's delay."

"I am aware of all that," said Julia, pouting. "But surely I can be spared just for one moment, to meet Curzon and make some excuse for not introducing him into my own chamber to-night?"

"And why should I not feel an equal anxiety to do the same towards Malpas?" asked Emma: then, without waiting for a reply, she said somewhat impatiently, "No, my dear Julia—we must do nothing that can possibly injure the even tenour and the safe progress of matters *elsewhere*. It is sufficient that Mrs. Ranger has this moment introduced the doctor into the house, without our running out and in to chat with our lovers. Only fancy what troubles might ensue if any disturbance were created or any exposure took place, through thoughtlessness or carelessness on our part."

"But I do not mean—I do not propose for an instant," exclaimed Julia, "that we should bring in Curzon or Malpas to-night. What I meant was, that as we have each given our lovers an appointment, and as they will be sure to keep it, it will be better that we should just hasten to them, if only for a moment, so as to prevent them from lounging about in the gardens, not only at the risk of being discovered, but also at that of encountering each other."

"I again protest against such a proceeding on our parts," said Emma. "Agatha is now in the pains of labour—and Mrs. Ranger has just stealthily introduced the doctor to her apartment. Presently there will be more goings-out. Why should we increase the number of these movements backward and forward, and thus run a risk of creating an alarm? Suppose that such alarm be created—the Princess herself might come forth from her own chamber to ascertain what was the matter—and then Mrs. Hubbard would see at once that it is *not* her Royal Highness who is this night becoming a mother and for whom the doctor has been so secretly smuggled into the villa. Nay, more—it might be discovered that Agatha was thus giving birth to a child——"

"Yes, yes," said Julia, nervously; "I perceive full well that too much precaution on our part cannot be exercised."

"Now you are speaking reasonably," exclaimed Emma. "Besides, have you not told Curzon that whenever you fail to be punctual at the place of meeting, he is to conclude that something has transpired to prevent you from keeping the appointment?"

"Oh! yes—I have invariably given him that warning," replied Julia. "Indeed, I have always begged and implored that he would not remain five minutes beyond the appointed hour."

"And I have spoken in the same terms to Malpas," remarked Emma. "There is consequently nothing to fear. When they find that we do not join them, they will take their departure each by his own special route, instead of lingering in the grounds."

"The worst of it is," said Julia, still in a tone of deep regret, "that I told Curzon so positively I would meet him to-night, no matter what weather it might be——"

"And I gave an equally serious promise to the Colonel," interrupted Emma. "But they both know full well, or at least must suppose, that we are not altogether our own mistresses, but to a considerable extent are dependent on the will, if not the caprice, of her Royal Highness. And after all, I have no doubt that Curzon on the one hand, and Malpas on the other, only wish to renew their mingled persuasions, entreaties, and threats, to induce us to run away with them. As if I," exclaimed Emma, laughing merrily, and thus unconsciously displaying to full advantage the two rows of brilliant teeth which adorned her mouth,—"as if I would ever compromise myself so far as to elope with a married man—a Colonel who has sold his commission—a mere fashionable dangler, without a shilling in his pocket! No, no—Malpas is good-looking, and is therefore all very well as a lover in secret——And you, Julia," added Emma, suddenly interrupting herself to fix her attention upon her sister; "*you* surely would not be foolish enough to run away with Curzon—an insolvent nobleman steeped to the very lips in debt, and who would abandon you the moment he was sated with your beauties or felt you to be a burthen on his finances?"

"Do you—do you really think," asked Julia, with tremulous voice and hesitating manner, "that Curzon is so selfish—so unprincipled?"

"Of course—all men are!" rejoined Emma, decisively, as if there could be no doubt relative to the truth of her averment. "Curzon and Malpas have most probably left England to avoid their debts and duns: or else why should they have been travelling in a humble manner——"

"You forget, Emma," interrupted her sister, "that we are not aware in what manner our lovers were travelling *before* they fell in with us at Milan. In fact, it was thence that Curzon followed me in so secret and stealthy a manner: and the same may be said of the proceedings of Malpas towards yourself."

"Well," exclaimed Emma, "there is no doubt that they have hitherto been infatuated with regard to us: and if they were single men, with good fortunes, we might inveigle them into the matrimonial noose. As it is, things are quite different; they are both married, and both notoriously hampered in their finances. Very certain is it, then, that I do not intend to ruin myself for ever by an elopement with Malpas—and I sincerely hope that you are equally well resolved with regard to Curzon? You do not answer me, Julia——"

"I confess that I am not altogether indifferent to the Earl's handsome person and agreeable manners," remarked Julia: then, with a sudden assumption of firmness and decision, she said, "But I agree with you, sister—it would be the height of folly to elope with a married man who does not possess a fortune as an indemnification for the other drawbacks of his position. Very clear, however, is it that I shall now soon lose Curzon altogether," added Julia, with a profound sigh.

"And are there no other lovers in the world to be obtained?" demanded Emma, impatiently. "Julia, my dear girl, without flattery let me assure you that you are handsomer than ever—and you need not fear that you will long remain without such sweet solace as you require, even though Curzon should abandon you to-morrow. For my part, I mean to tell Malpas plainly enough that if he annoys me with any farther entreaties to elope with him, he had

better depart altogether: for though I like him very well as a lover, I am not prepared to submit to him as a dictator."

"What can Curzon mean," asked Julia, "by constantly hinting that I ought to give him my fullest confidence—that I should keep no secrets from him—that I should unbosom myself altogether——"

"Oh! Malpas talks to me in precisely the same strain," interrupted Emma, petulantly; "as I have told you over and over again. But this is the way with all men who seek to persuade a woman into a particular course. Here, Curzon on the one hand and Malpas on the other are seeking to worm themselves altogether into our confidence: they know that ladies in our position are acquainted with many little secrets connected with the royal personages, and so on—and they think that by breaking down every barrier of reserve, they establish a greater familiarity—a deeper intimacy—and thus render themselves indispensably necessary to us."

"But all this must arise," said Julia, "from—from——"

"Love, you would say?" exclaimed Emma. "No—it is a temporary infatuation on their part. Without vanity, we may declare ourselves to be two very fine girls: we have everything in our favour; and it is no wonder that Curzon and Malpas, sheer voluptuaries in their hearts, should be for a season captivated by our beauty and enchained by our fascinations. Besides, the whole adventure has for them a mystery which increases its charm to an ineffable degree. But once let Malpas have me altogether to himself—dwelling with him as his mistress—constantly with him from morning to night—or let the same take place with you and Curzon—and the result will speedily show how fickle and inconstant Man can soon become wearied of the most beautiful woman."

"There is a great deal of truth in what you say," remarked Julia, evidently much struck by her sister's observations. "Therefore, solemnly and emphatically do I assure you, that happen what may, I will not suffer myself to be persuaded to elope with Lord Curzon. And now tell me, Emma—has it never struck you as singular that the Earl and the Colonel should not have once met?—for if they had, the one would have told me and the other would have told you——"

"As a matter of course they would avoid such an encounter, even if they were to behold each other from a distance," interrupted Emma: "for as they are each living under a false name—humbly, obscurely, and even mysteriously—they would of course avoid a meeting which would either render explanations necessary, or else by the refusal of them leave a singular impression upon each other's mind. No—I do not for a moment suppose that they *have* met: for even when coming to the villa at night to keep their appointments respectively with you and me, they have to take separate paths in order to reach the distinct points where we thus encounter them: and if one heard the footsteps of the other, he would of course try to get out of his way. Thus when two men, though in reality well acquainted with each other—as we know that the Earl and the Colonel were in London—have each a distinct, separate, and special reason for preserving an *incognito* at some place afar from home, I believe that they may succeed in doing so for months—and even years—to such an extent, that the one shall not even have an idea of the resence of the other in the same city."

"I can assure you, Emma," said Julia, "that my lover is most heartily tired of preserving this *incognito*."

"And mine also," responded Emma. "But as I have before told you, there are other good-looking and amorously-disposed young men in the world; and amongst the foreign noblemen and gentlemen who visit at the villa, I have seen more than one who would compensate me for the loss of Malpas. Let our two present lovers go, then—and the sooner the better, if their infatuation becomes a positive persecution towards ourselves. They have answered our purpose in a double sense: they have suited us as gallants in a pretty little intrigue—and they have aided us in fulfilling the behest of our friends in England. We have made them our dupes, our agents, and our instruments in the ramifications of conspiracy, as well as our paramours in the transports of love. From the very first moment that Malpas began to demonstrate peculiar and unmistakeable attentions to me at Milan, did I perceive how it would be possible to render him useful in the grand designs which we were appointed to carry out. You also, on your side, Julia, foresaw the same result with regard to Curzon; and within the last few days our fore-knowledge in those respects has been amply justified. Truly Mrs. Ranger is a very, very clever woman—for to her is due all the credit of the idea involving the Princess's ermine cloak and green silk hood——"

"Yes—and to her also," added Julia, "may be attributed the idea of putting Mrs. Hubbard on the watch."

"'Twas excellent," exclaimed Emma, laughing merrily. "But what shall we say of that *other* idea for which we are indebted to the splendid invention of Mrs. Ranger?" she asked significantly.

"What? your dressing up in male apparel, with a pair of false whiskers and moustachios?" said Julia, laughing in her turn.

"Now did I not, when thus dressed up, personate Bergami to perfection?" exclaimed Emma, as if the tremendous phase to which she was now alluding, in the hideous conspiracy whereof she and her sisters were the instruments, could be made an object of triumph and self-felicitation. "Worthy Mrs. Ranger has indeed managed uncommonly well: for whenever I was performing the part of Bergami, and when appearing to steal so cautiously along the passage, Mrs. Ranger always compelled the observant Mrs. Hubbard to retreat from her prying position at her chamber door the moment that I reached the entrance into the Princess's apartment. Ah! little thought the scandal-loving laundress that the Bergami she thus saw was but a false one after all—merely Miss Emma Owen dressed up to resemble the handsome equerry—and that so far from ever penetrating into her Royal Highness's apartment in such a guise and at such an hour of the night, I stole hastily back to my own the instant I knew the said Mrs. Hubbard was no longer peeping forth at the end of the passage."

"There can be no doubt," said Julia, "that we are doing our best to fulfil the instructions of those who placed us about the person of her Royal Highness."

"Especially within the last few days," said

Emma, "have we managed to heap together an immense amount of circumstantial evidence tending to criminate the Princess: and now, the proceedings of this night will tend to crown them all."

"Yes," added Julia; "for good Mrs. Ranger has done her best to confirm Mrs. Hubbard in the belief that 'tis the Princess herself who is about to become a mother—and thus is the web rapidly closing in around the unconscious, and I must say undeserving and much-to-be-pitied wife of the Prince Regent."

"Ah! if we were all well-off, rich, and independent—you, I, and Agatha," observed Emma, "we might then afford to show pity and forbearance towards one of our own sex: but we dare not—no, we dare not, Julia! We must continue to steel our hearts against her—even as we have already hardened them. Methought that her Royal Highness was never so amiable—never so kind—never so truly affable and winning, as when this morning, surrounded by her ladies, she chatted so familiarly with us all. Then for a moment did my heart quiver, and strange feelings passed over me, as a sense of the treacherous part which I was enacting, struck keenly and acutely upon my soul. But I stifled the sensation—trampled it as it were under foot——"

"Say no more, sister!" cried Julia, with evident trepidation: "that is a feeling which I myself have also experienced more than once—aye, many, many times—and I cannot bear to think of it! But I wonder whether Curzon and Malpas are still waiting there—or whether they are gone!" she suddenly observed in order to change the conversation. "'Tis past eleven o'clock," she added, glancing at the time-piece which stood upon the mantel.

"Yes—more than a quarter past," observed Emma: "and as our appointments were respectively fixed for eleven punctually, it is not likely that our lovers are waiting still. I wonder how long it will be before we are summoned to Agatha's room——"

"And I wonder how Agatha herself, poor girl! is getting on," added Julia, a sudden shade appearing upon her countenance. "What if anything fatal were to happen to her?" she inquired, with a chill shudder passing visibly over her form.

"Heavens!" ejaculated Emma, catching the infection of that cold tremor: "do not meet misfortunes half way—do not anticipate an evil that would necessitate the fullest and completest exposure!"

At this moment a low but hasty knock at the door of the apartment cut short the conversation between the young ladies; and issuing gently forth, they at once proceeded to Agatha's chamber which was precisely opposite. A small lamp was there burning, dimly and feebly, in the fireplace: but the heavy draperies were carefully drawn over the casements, so as to prevent even that faint glimmer from being observed without—it being a part of the various precautions adopted that there should be no ground, whatever might transpire thereafter, for any one to be able to affirm that there was a light seen in Agatha's chamber on this occasion.

The curtains were also drawn closely around the bed in which Agatha lay; and she herself had her head completely enveloped in a thick black veil. But so feeble was the light that this precaution was scarcely necessary: for the room was already dark enough—and within the deeper obscurity of the couch, surrounded as it was by draperies, it would have been impossible for Maravelli, had he chosen to raise his bandage, to distinguish the features of his patient with a view to future recognition. So dull indeed was that light, that no mere transient glance furtively thrown around the room would enable the doctor to observe its appearance in such a way as to know it again;—and we may here observe that when Mrs. Ranger quitted the chamber and crossed the passage for a moment to knock at Emma's door opposite, she took the lamp with her. For be it understood that the object was to let Dr. Maravelli go forth from the villa that night with the impression that it was the Princess of Wales whom he had delivered of a child: hence the real absence of efficient precaution on the part of Mrs. Ranger when conducting him from Geneva to the villa. In plain terms, she wished him to know that it *was* the villa which he thus entered: but it must be obvious to the reader that she did *not* want him to know which room it was in the villa where his patient was confined.

With these explanatory observations we resume the thread of our history.

The moment Emma and Julia entered the chamber they beheld the doctor, with the black bandage over his eyes, seated by the side of the couch, holding Agatha's arm in such a way that he could feel her pulse. Mrs. Ranger, on speeding back into the chamber after knocking at Emma's door, had again deposited the lamp in the depth of the spacious hearth: then, turning towards the two girls as they entered immediately after, she pointed significantly to an object upon a chair. Emma and Julia instantaneously comprehended the truth, from the expression of her countenance: for she had laid aside her cloak, bonnet, and veil, for the present. Then, a few words conveyed in a hasty whisper, ratified the idea which the girls had conceived. To be brief, Agatha had been delivered of a still-born child; and the tiny corpse was enveloped in a flannel ready to be taken away. Indeed, the doctor was at this moment satisfying himself, by feeling his patient's pulse and putting to her a few brief questions, that she was in a condition that would justify him in leaving her.

Emma and Julia were slightly shocked when the well wrapped-up corpse of their sister's child was thus pointed out to them: but the next moment they both experienced a feeling of satisfaction that the babe was dead;—and in answer to the rapid question which they whisperingly put to Mrs. Ranger relative to Agatha's condition, they were still more rejoiced on learning that she was progressing favourably.

Now, then, came the moment for these young ladies to play the part already arranged for them, and which was a contrivance admirably adapted to display the diabolical ingenuity of Mrs. Ranger,—a contrivance invested with an air so natural and so perfectly genuine, that it was indeed but too well calculated to make the desired impression upon Dr. Maravelli's mind—namely, that it was the royal mistress of that villa who was his patient now!

The moment those few whispered words already

alluded to had been exchanged between the sisters and Mrs. Ranger, the two young ladies advanced quickly towards the couch;—and as if labouring under the excitement of the sincerest feelings of devotion and love, they threw themselves upon their knees—seizing Agatha's hand and pressing it by turns to their lips: then, as if hurried away by excess of emotion, Emma murmured, "O dearest, dearest Princess!"

"Beloved Princess!" added Julia, also in accents that seemed characteristic of the most genuine excitement.

At the same instant Mrs. Ranger darted forward, as if perfectly horrified at the expressions which had just fallen from the young ladies' lips, and with a quick "Hush! hush!" which seemed to denote a terrible perturbation on her part.

Nothing of all this was lost upon the doctor. Without understanding English, the word *Princess*, as just pronounced by the young ladies' lips, was quite intelligible to him,—the French word being very nearly the same: and then the sudden flurry into which Mrs. Ranger seemed to be thrown, and her apparent eagerness to prevent any farther ebullition of the feelings on their part, naturally confirmed Maravelli's belief that the patient whom he had been brought hither under such mysterious circumstances to attend upon, could be none other than the Princess of Wales!

CHAPTER CXXXIV.

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT.—ACT THE THIRD.

THUS far all the plans, plots, and machinations of Mrs. Ranger and the Misses Owen, relative to the proceeding of this memorable night, were crowned with success. But now the curtain was about to rise upon a new phase in the intricately-woven and strangely-ramified performance.

Emma and Julia had been brought into their sister's room on the present occasion for two reasons. The first was to enact the little scene with the description of which we closed the preceding chapter: the second was to keep watch upon Maravelli for the few moments during which Mrs. Ranger was now compelled to absent herself from the apartment.

Hastily threading the passage, the wily woman repaired to the chamber occupied by Mrs. Hubbard, who had not retired to rest. Indeed, the light burning upon the table showed the liveliest curiosity, mingled with an air of much mystery and importance, on the features of the laundress; and the moment Mrs. Ranger entered the room, she rushed forward, exclaiming quickly, "Wal, mem, be it all over?"

"Yes, all—and well over too," answered Mrs. Ranger significantly. "The child is dead!"

"Dead!" ejaculated Mrs. Hubbard, holding up her arms with an affectation of dismay: "the poor leetle hinnocent lambkin of a babby!"

"There is nothing to regret," said Mrs. Ranger, speaking quickly. "It is much better it should be so."

"Wal, so it be, mem," observed Mrs. Hubbard; "and I always thought what a blessin' it would be if as how the egspected little un should hop the twig, as they say of the dear little birds——But," she cried, suddenly interrupting herself; for she saw that her visitant was looking somewhat impatient: "if so be there is anythink I can do——"

"Well, my dear good woman, said Mrs. Ranger: "this is precisely the reason that has brought me hither. For as I have considered you deserving of my confidence—and regarding you as a discreet, well-behaved, and prudent woman, I have not hesitated to trust you hitherto, and am going to trust you still farther now——There! pray don't interrupt me—but listen. The child is dead and must be taken hence at once. The doctor is ready to depart——"

"Marmajelly, mem?" said Mrs. Hubbard, in inquiring allusion to the doctor's name.

"Yes — Maravelli," answered Mrs. Ranger, quickly. "He is ready to depart, and I must conduct him back to the city—because, as you beheld him when you peeped forth from your room ere now, he is blindfolded. He will take charge of the corpse—he will dispose of it. But while descending the stairs and threading the garden, there may be some risk of being observed; and if a strange man were thus seen within the precincts of the villa, an alarm would be raised—he would be arrested—and then if the corpse were discovered——You understand me—you can guess the service I require at your hands? That staircase," she added hastily, pointing to the one in the corner of the room, "leads up into the laundry—and from the laundry there is another means of communication down into the garden—is it not so? Good—will you, then, take charge of the dead child—steal forth—make the circuit of the grounds—and meet me and the doctor at the door opening in the garden-wall on the road through the fields?"

Mrs. Hubbard—who felt herself suddenly elevated to a very high pedestal of importance by being thus admitted into what she supposed to be a stupendous secret regarding the honour of the Princess of Wales,—at once consented to render the service required at her hands. Thereupon Mrs. Ranger left her for a few moments, and as she went down the passage extinguished the light burning there—so as to prevent Mrs. Hubbard from noticing which room it was she entered, in case the worthy woman should think fit to peep through the key-hole.

On re-entering Agatha's chamber again, Mrs. Ranger—who was assuredly as indefatigable as she was astute for all purposes of evil—made a hasty sign indicative that all was right; and this was promptly understood by Emma and Julia, who were now standing by the side of the bed, closely watching Maravelli. Taking up the corpse of the child, Mrs. Ranger hurried back to the apartment of the laundress, to whom she immediately consigned the light but somewhat repulsive burden. Then having seen Mrs. Hubbard, who had previously huddled on a cloak and bonnet, disappear with the object entrusted to her up the staircase to the laundry, Mrs. Ranger sped back to Agatha's chamber. Here she once more resumed her own cloak, bonnet, and thick veil: then taking Maravelli's hand, she led him forth with the same appearance of profound and mysterious precaution which she had observed when introducing him thither three quarters of an hour previously.

Conducting him down the secret staircase—out of the villa—into the garden, she put in his hands

a purse which gave forth that golden chink so pleasing to his ears; and at the same time she said to him in a low whisper, "You have not been detained long."

"No," responded the doctor, in an equally subdued tone: "I should not mind having a similar adventure every night of my life."

They now continued to advance in silence. The gardens were threaded—and the back-gate was reached. Mrs. Hubbard was not there: Mrs. Ranger and the doctor accordingly waited five minutes.

"Wherefore did we not bring the corpse with us?" he asked. "It would have been much better."

"I was fearful that if you should happen to be observed and an alarm should be created," responded Mrs. Ranger, "the most serious peril might ensue. But I have entrusted the child to a woman in whom I can rely. She will be here in a moment—she cannot possibly be long. Hark! I hear footsteps. Perhaps she cannot find her way through the darkness of the night. Stay you here—I will go and meet her."

Thus speaking, Mrs. Ranger relinquished the doctor's hand, and proceeded some twenty yards in the direction where she had heard footsteps moving. But just at the instant that a ray of moonshine gleamed from behind a cloud, shadowing forth her form cloaked and veiled as it was, she was startled by an abrupt spring as if a wild beast were bounding through the trees: and so suddenly was she seized upon by the strong arms of a man, that a dread consternation paralyzed her very tongue, thus preventing her from giving utterance to the faintest cry. The next instant she was gagged by a piece of linen, or handkerchief, being thrust into her mouth. Then, quick as thought, the ruffian who had thus made her captive, lifted her in his strong arms, and bore her as if she were a mere child to a garden-seat that stood against the wall. On this he jumped with marvellous agility; and over the wall he at once tossed her as unceremoniously as if she were a bundle of rags. The shriek that sprang up in her throat, was stifled by the gag thrust into her mouth: but instead of falling to the ground, she was caught in the arms of another individual, who at once scud along the road with his living burthen to where a post-chaise was waiting at a little distance, and the outlines of which appeared to her view just as the moonbeams were vanishing again. The next moment, and Mrs. Ranger was flung into the vehicle as coolly and comfortably as she had been ere now tossed over the wall: and on being thus tumbled headlong inside the chaise, she pitched against another female, who gave vent to a sudden ejaculation in the pain caused by the concussion.

"Heavens! 'tis you, Mrs. Hubbard?" said Mrs. Ranger, relieving herself from the gag the moment her hands were free again, for she instantaneously recognised the voice of the laundress: then in quick, breathless, and scarcely audible accents, she said, "But the child?"

"Dropped in the garden," responded Mrs. Hubbard, "when a coarse vulgar furriner seized on me in the selvidgest manner possible and sent me flying over the wall jest for all the world like a battling-dore and shuttling-cock."

"Ah! 'twas the same with me," answered Mrs. Ranger. "But the child—what will happen now?"

"Gracious goodness on'y knows. Heavins, mem, what trouble you have brought me into!"—and Mrs. Hubbard fell to moaning and sobbing as if her heart would break.

The preceding colloquy only occupied a few moments: and even if it had not been cut short by Mrs. Hubbard's whimpering, it would have been at the very same moment by the entrance of one of the men into the vehicle. The door was then banged—his two companions leapt upon the box—the postilions cracked their whips—and away sped the equipage in the direction of the high road leading to Lausanne.

Meanwhile, Dr. Maravelli—hearing the tread of several footsteps, the sounds of voices, and then the galloping off of a post-chaise along the road skirting the back of the villa—was seized with nervous misgivings; and finding that his veiled guide returned not, but that all was still around, he felt convinced that something most unexpected and mysterious had occurred; and not knowing to what dangers he himself might be exposed, he hastened to scale the wall and beat a precipitate retreat back to his own house at Geneva.

CHAPTER CXXXV.

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT.—ACT THE FOURTH.

It was about half-past two o'clock in the morning, when the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas pushed their jaded steeds up the acclivitous steep of the main thoroughfare of Lausanne.

The night—or rather the morning—was pitch dark: for the moon had totally disappeared, and the sky was curtained with masses of sable drapery, as if nature had hung the empyrean arch with a funeral-pall. Nor did the dimly burning oil-lamps of Lausanne do much more than render that darkness visible. Nevertheless, without setting forth the salient features of the place, they served to guide our travellers to the hotel at which it had previously been arranged that they were to take up their quarters.

The porter of the establishment at once gave them admission: and as alacrity always prevails in a continental hotel when Englishmen make their appearance—their repute being that of wealthy and liberal-paying travellers—the Earl and the Colonel had no difficulty in obtaining all requisite comforts even at that unseasonable hour. A groom was promptly in readiness to take charge of the horses—and a waiter was summoned to conduct them to an apartment, where a blazing faggot on the hearth, wax-lights on the mantel, and a cold repast quickly spread upon the table, soon gave an air of luxurious comfort to a room which a few minutes before had been enwrapped in the darkness, the silence, and the chilliness of the hour.

These arrangements being made with that expedition for which continental waiters in general and Swiss ones in particular are so remarkable, the Earl proceeded to give a few hasty but clearly expressed instructions.

"Waiter," he said, slipping a couple of gold

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pieces into the man's hand, "listen to what I have to say. My friend and myself of course require bed-chambers, to which we shall not however immediately repair. We await the coming of a post-chaise containing two ladies and three men, who are serving as an escort to the said ladies. So soon as the carriage arrives, you will show the whole party up into this room; and in the interval you will direct that a bedchamber be provided for the two ladies, who are sisters and therefore will occupy the same couch. As for the three men who are coming with them, they may shift for themselves; for I know not whether they will remain or whether they will take their prompt departure again. Now you understand. So bring up a couple of bottles of champagne, by the aid of which, together with this array of eatables, my friend and I will while away the time till the carriage comes."

The waiter bowed acquiescence to all the instructions he had just received; and having served the wine that was ordered, the discreet functionary took his station in the porter's lodge to await the coming of the post-chaise.

"Well," said Curzon, as he and Malpas sate down together at the supper-table after the door had closed behind the waiter,—"this is indeed a night of mingled romance and excitement. It was eleven when we left Geneva—and it was half-past two as we set foot in Lausanne. Thirty miles in three hours and a half, with such horses as those, are no bad achievement."

"On the contrary, 'twas a famous ride," remarked Malpas, as he tossed off a bumper of champagne. "It will be at least an hour before the post-chaise arrives. But should you not have passed the girls off as our wives before that waiter to whom you ere now gave such elaborate instructions?"

"No such thing," exclaimed Curzon. "It is not by any means necessary to practise the least deception in the matter. Here we are safe at Lausanne,

in the Canton of Vaud, and therefore completely out of the jurisdiction of the authorities of Geneva. Even suppose that any disturbance should have been created, any exposure caused, and any pursuit instituted, nothing could be done to *us*. In the same way that a man seeks refuge in France against the consequence of his little irregularities in England, so may we make sure of impunity at Lausanne for this forcible abduction which we initiated at Geneva."

"I am well aware of all that you are saying," observed Malpas. "But for the credit of the girls themselves, we might as well have passed them off as our wives, whom we could represent as preferring the luxury of a chaise to our mode of travelling on horseback."

"And when the chaise does arrive," remarked Curzon, "the waiter would think that we entrusted our wives to three of the most hang-dog looking scoundrels that ever lived. But, upon my word, you seem to have a mighty great consideration all of a sudden for the fair fame of your Emma! Come, tell me candidly—did you ever care half so much for your own wife?"

"I do not pretend to care very particularly for Emma Owen," replied Malpas; "and as for my wife, I never cared much for her."

"Perhaps you have cared more for some other man's wife?" said Curzon, suddenly surveying the Colonel in so strange a manner that he turned ghastly pale, trembled visibly, and dropping his knife and fork, sat gazing on the Earl with a half-stolid, half-frightened air.

"I—I—don't—that is, I can't exactly understand you," were the words he stammered forth in broken accents. "What do you mean, Curzon?"

"I mean just *this*, Malpas," said the Earl, now adopting a resolute aspect and decisive tone,—"that inasmuch as we shall most probably part in a few hours—you to journey in one direction along with your Emma, and I to take another in company with my Julia—we may as well have a word or two of mutual explanation——"

"But I do not understand you," said Malpas, plucking up as much courage as he could possibly summon to his aid.

"Well, but you *must* suspect what I mean," exclaimed Curzon: then, as he deliberately produced a brace of pistols from his pocket, he said, "These weapons, with which you urged me to provide myself as a means of protection during our journey, shall send a couple of bullets into your brain, unless you answer me truly and faithfully in respect to certain matters wherein you can clear up the small amount of mystery that remains unsolved and unread by me."

"Curzon, you are jesting—you are joking," stammered Malpas, turning still more deadly pale than at first: and inasmuch as the muzzles of the pistols were point blank towards him, he shifted his chair in such a manner as to place himself beyond the limit of their range.

"Silence—and do not interrupt me!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon in a stern voice: then, resuming a deliberate and measured tone, he said, "For a month past you and I have been apparently upon friendly terms together: but believe me when I say that all the while there has been such a rankling, festering, irritating spirit within me, that I have often loathed myself for thus being even commonly civil to one who——But no matter—we have not time for unnecessary comment—barely sufficient for requisite explanation. Once more listen, then! We are about to separate—and before we part you must tell me *everything*. I need not tell you what it is that I seek to know: your very looks at this moment are a sufficient indication that you comprehend me full well. But this I may say—tell me everything, and I will allow you to go unhurt and scatheless. I will not avenge myself on *you*, provided you give me the means of avenging myself on *another*. For mark you," continued the Earl, whose feelings had been gradually growing excited while he was thus speaking: "my wife——Ah! now you start more visibly still as I thus allude to her——"

"Go on, my lord—go on," said Malpas, most painfully anxious to arrive at the end of the colloquy so that the pistols might disappear from the table.

"As I was saying, then," resumed the Earl, now speaking hurriedly, as if he were also desirous to terminate the present scene; "my wife, the moment she hears of Julia Owen's elopement with me, will be taking active steps to obtain a divorce. But I must be beforehand with her: 'tis I who must take the initiative—or if I should be forestalled in that respect, I must at all events be enabled to turn round and retaliate with a counter-charge of adultery. *Now*, Colonel Malpas, you understand me: and no man in the world can better than yourself give me the information which I require. Once more, then, do I enjoin you to tell me everything—the whole history of your connexion with my wife, from first to last—and on that condition alone will I spare you!"

As he gave utterance to the concluding words of his speech, Lord Curzon took the pistols in his hands with a threatening demeanour: and then followed a scene of deep degradation, utter humiliation, and dastard compromise on the part of Colonel Malpas. He did indeed reveal everything,—entering into the minutest details of his connexion with the Countess of Curzon—confessing how Lady Lechmere's agency and Gertrude's artifice had served the progress of their intrigue—how Editha had given him the forged bills—how he had led her to explain the whole transaction at Mrs. Gale's house of infamy, while Emmerson was an unseen listener—and how, after his imprisonment in the King's Bench, his threats of exposure had extorted the sum necessary for his release. In a word, all those particulars which are so well known to the reader in respect to the Colonel's amour with the Countess of Curzon, were now revealed by the craven wretch. The Earl listened calmly and tranquilly—putting frequent leading questions when Malpas hesitated—or actually dragging forth the replies when, through very shame or fear, he occasionally stopped short.

Some farther conversation took place between the Earl and the Colonel, but which we need not now pause to relate. Suffice it to say that Lord Curzon was himself surprised at the comparative ease with which he had thus succeeded in working upon the fears of the dastard Malpas;—and this circumstance suddenly prompted him to make a further use of the cowardly fellow's present ductility of humour. In fact, the Earl had a certain lingering sentiment of curiosity to gratify:

and it was natural enough that he should avail himself of the influence he had acquired over the Colonel's fears in order to satisfy himself on this one remaining point.

"We have now said all that we need say," he observed, "relative to the worthless woman who bears the title of my wife:"—then assuming the sternest expression of countenance and pointing both the pistols direct at Malpas, he said, "Now tell me—and beware how you give utterance to a falsehood—tell me I say, by what means you made your peace with Lady Sackville, who at one time was so terribly embittered against you."

"On issuing from prison," replied Malpas, grovelling like a coward, in the presence of those pistols, the muzzles of which were but three feet from his head,—"I wrote to her a penitent letter imploring her pardon. She sent for me to Carlton House—she proposed to me this mission in which I am now engaged—a mission similar to your own——"

"But——and now answer me with the solemn serious truth," interrupted the Earl,—"did she receive you with favour—did she smile upon you?"

"No, no," responded Malpas, actually writhing as he beheld the Earl's fingers playing as it were with the triggers of the pistols: "she treated me with scorn—she seemed to regard me as a reptile——"

"Ah! that is sufficient," said the Earl, lowering the pistols: and his curiosity being gratified with regard to the subject of his inquiry—he muttered half audibly, "I see—I understand—she made a tool of you—she treated you as a hireling agent well fitted to do her dirty work. But she should not have placed *me* on the same footing:"—and the haughty Earl of Curzon bit his lip with an evident expression of vexation.

Although so profoundly a prey to his dastard fears, the Colonel did not fail to catch those words and mark that mien on the part of the nobleman; and a suspicion of the real truth instantaneously flashed to his mind. It struck him, indeed, that the Earl of Curzon had received the lovely Venetia's favours: hence the inquiry he had just put relative to his connexion with that charming creature—an inquiry which evidently arose from mingled jealousy and curiosity: hence also those remarks which the Earl had half-muttered to himself—and hence the vexation which he experienced on reflecting that *he* had likewise been used as a fitting agent for Venetia's dirty work!

Such were the reflections that swept through the Colonel's brain: and no sooner had the truth thus flashed to his comprehension, when he all in a moment saw the advantage that might be derived from a knowledge of this important secret.

Suddenly inspired, therefore, by one of those fits of courageous energy which selfish considerations will often excite even on the part of the craven and the poltroon,—Malpas seized upon the pistols which the Earl of Curzon had just laid down again on the table.

"Now then, my lord—it is *my* turn?" he exclaimed, as he levelled both the weapons point blank at Curzon's head.

"Don't be a fool," said the nobleman, without losing his presence of mind, and even with a smile of disdain upon his lip.

"By heaven!" exclaimed Malpas, "I will fire, unless you give me certain explanations in your turn. First then, the secret of *your* connexion with Lady Sackville——"

"You are mighty brave all of a sudden, Malpas," interrupted the Earl, eyeing the Colonel with calm contempt: "but those pistols are not really loaded."

"Then in that case," cried Malpas, who was well assured of the contrary—for he felt convinced that the Earl would not have encumbered himself with a pair of useless weapons—"in that case there will be no harm in my firing the pistols at you just by way of amusement."

"Cease this jesting," said the Earl, with a slight but perceptible change of countenance, and a simultaneous recoil from the muzzle of the pistols.

"Ah!" cried Malpas, in accents of triumph and assurance: "I see that they *are* loaded—and I take heaven to witness that I will fire! For mark you—I am a desperate man—setting little value on life, because having little left to live for—and I will fire, then, unless you place yourself as much in my power as I have placed myself in yours! Say, then—the secret of *your* connexion with Lady Sackville——"

"She has made me her agent in the same way as she has done by you," responded Curzon, now really alarmed lest the Colonel should be tempted by the frenzied excitement of opportunity to a fearful retaliation for the scene which had previously taken place.

"No—not merely her agent," ejaculated the Colonel, his countenance growing more pale and his lips quivering more nervously through the effort which it cost him thus to display so much energy. "Not her agent, I say—but her lover! Confess the truth——"

"Well, it *is* the truth," rejoined the Earl, believing that Malpas had worked himself up to a pitch of excitement rendering him perfectly reckless and desperate.

"That is enough for me!" said the Colonel: and depositing the pistols upon the table, he instantaneously emptied a tumbler of water over the priming, so that the weapons might not serve any further purpose of coercion.

At the same moment the sounds of a vehicle approaching up the acclivitous street, reached their ears; and hastening each to a separate window, they beheld the expected post-chaise drive up to the door of the hotel. By the light of the street-lamps they observed two female figures alight from the interior of the carriage: and turning away from the casements, they fixed their eyes upon the room-door, so as to be ready to welcome (as they thought) the fair ones whom they had caused to be so forcibly carried off!

In a couple of minutes that door was thrown open—and Koboit made his appearance, exclaiming, "Now at all events, ladies, any doubt upon the subject will be cleared up—and you shall see who is right."

"Cleared up——Heavens! what does this mean?" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, as his eyes encountered two female forms which, though cloaked and veiled, were assuredly not those of Emma and Julia Owen.

Mrs. Ranger and Mrs. Hubbard at once threw up their veils, thus revealing their own antique and repulsive countenances, instead of the youthful and attractive features of the two charming sisters!

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Earl of Curzon. "What mistake—what treachery is this?"

"These precious hags," cried Malpas, "are but poor substitutes——"

"There!" shrieked forth Mrs. Ranger, in accents of furious indignation, as she bent her looks upon Kobolt,—speaking also in the French tongue: "I told you over and over again during the ride hither, that there was some fearful mistake——"

"Then the error rests not with me," replied the man curtly: "for I followed the instructions I received to the very letter——"

"Yes," added his two companions, who had followed close behind up into the apartment of the hotel; "these women were caught in the villa-gardens, each just where we had been led to expect them."

"My lord," Mrs. Ranger now hastened to observe, —for she knew the Earl of Curzon full well by sight,—"one word. 'Tis clear you have committed—or rather caused to be perpetrated—a most unwarrantable outrage upon me and this good woman here. But if you will at once direct that we be conducted back to Geneva, we will consent to forgive not only yourself but also your accomplice *there*"—glancing towards Malpas,—"and your agents *here*," she added, turning towards Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden.

"For heaven's sake begone, then!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon: and putting a number of gold pieces into Kobolt's hand, he said, "Depart—and undo your night's work as quickly as you have done it!"

The next moment the room was cleared of all save the Earl and Malpas, who once more found themselves alone together. For nearly a minute did they survey each other with an expression of countenance in which there was something ludicrous: for they both felt all the ridicule of their present position. But they exchanged not a word until the post-chaise had taken its departure—fresh horses having been procured—to retrace its way to Geneva.

"*Now* what is to be done?" demanded Colonel Malpas, at length breaking a silence which had lasted nearly half-an-hour.

"For my part," answered Curzon, doggedly, "I wash my hands of any further interference in the business."

With these words he rang the bell furiously; and on the waiter making his appearance he said in an imperious tone, "Conduct me to my chamber:"—then, without taking any farther notice of Malpas, he stalked out of the room.

The Colonel likewise sought the couch prepared for him; and on awakening at a late hour in the forenoon, he inquired for the Earl of Curzon.

"Your companion, sir?" observed the domestic to whom the question was put. "Oh! he took his departure an hour ago for Berne."

"Ah!" thought Malpas to himself; "he doubtless means to get back to England as quick as possible, in order to tell a good story to Venetia—and 'tis ten to one that he will throw the whole blame of failure upon me. But I must forestall him, if possible. Waiter, a post-chaise and four immediately!"

And in less than half-an-hour, Colonel Malpas likewise took his departure from Lausanne.

CHAPTER CXXXVI.

THE DRAMA OF A NIGHT.—ACT THE FIFTH.

We must now return to Agatha's bed-chamber at the villa in the suburbs of Geneva.

Mrs. Ranger, be it remembered, had left Emma and Julia by the bedside of their eldest sister; and as this young lady, who had just become the mother of a dead child, fell into a tranquil slumber, the other two sate silent, or else occasionally conversed in low whispers while watching by the invalid's couch.

An hour elapsed, and Mrs. Ranger did not return. Then another hour passed—and still she came not. Emma and Julia now grew seriously alarmed: they were utterly at a loss to conjecture what could detain the old lady. Was it possible that some accident had befallen her?—had she been waylaid and maltreated, or perhaps murdered? They shuddered as they hazarded these surmises to each other; —and as the time still kept slipping on and Mrs. Ranger re-appeared not, the fears of the two girls became at length absolutely intolerable. Fortunately Agatha still slept on—thus remaining unconscious of the annoyance that was torturing her sisters.

The time-piece on the mantel proclaimed half-past two. Three hours had now elapsed since Mrs. Ranger took her departure with Dr. Maravelli. Suddenly Emma bethought herself of ascertaining whether Mrs. Hubbard had received any intimation from Mrs. Ranger of the probability of this prolonged absence on her part. To Mrs. Hubbard's apartment did Emma accordingly bend her stealthy steps in the dark. But the laundress was not there—nor had her bed been slept in during the night. Tortured with new terrors more agonizing and bewildering than the first alarms, Emma hastened to rejoin her sister Julia, who became perfectly aghast on hearing that Mrs. Hubbard was not to be found. Conjecture became useless—almost impossible: it was utterly defied by the darkness of the mystery which enwrapped the ominous affair.

Still Agatha slept on—and this was at least fortunate for the two affrighted girls, who would have been loth indeed to communicate their terrors to their invalid sister. But still their own thoughts were harrowing to a degree. What was to be done? Were they to remain quietly and tranquilly in that chamber and allow things to take their course? No—it was impossible. The disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress seemed to be indicative of a thousand unknown dangers; and in the now feverish, excited, and nervous state to which Emma and Julia had been wrought up, it seemed to them as if things would grow worse unless actually looked after by themselves.

"This torturing suspense can be endured no longer," whispered Emma. "I am resolved to go down into the garden and ascertain if I can hear anything of them; or even discover the slightest trace——"

"But the night is dark as pitch," said Julia, drawing aside the window curtain for a moment. "You cannot go forth alone—and I dare not accompany you, because Agatha must not be left——"

"No—I do not wish you to go with me. You shall remain here," said Emma. "I will steal forth alone. Perhaps Maravelli himself has made away

with Mrs. Ranger and the laundress: or perhaps they have been discovered by the police, with the corpse of the child——"

"O horror!" interrupted Julia, a cold tremor passing visibly over her form. "Conjecture may run riot amidst ten thousand dreadful things—— But you must not leave me, Emma! If *you* did not come back, what on earth should I do?"

"What on earth will you do if I remain?" asked Emma. "Come, my dear sister—muster up all your courage—this is no season for faintness of heart. Remain you here with Agatha, while I will at all events descend into the garden: for I am now in one of those shocking humours that I feel I shall go mad with the agonies of suspense, if I do not take some step towards the solution of this horrible mystery."

With these words Emma flung a reassuring glance upon her sister Julia, and then stole forth from the room. The passage was, as we have before said, pitch dark—Mrs. Ranger, be it remembered, having extinguished the lamp: but Emma had no difficulty in finding her way to her own chamber, where she hastily put on a cloak and bonnet. She then crept to the staircase, down which she stole noiselessly as a sprite.

Emerging forth from the back entrance of the villa, Emma paused for a moment as she found herself in the darkness, the silence, and the solitude of the spacious grounds in the rear of the dwelling. But summoning all her fortitude to her aid, she sped forward along a well-known pathway. Shapes of terror, darker than the darkness, seemed to flit around her—and presently a shriek rose to the very tip of her tongue as she all of a sudden caught a glimpse of something white and shapely as a human form, that appeared to stand forth out of the surrounding obscurity. But the conviction flashed upon her mind that it was but one of the marble statues ornamenting the garden, which had thus for a moment scared her;—and passing the phantom-looking object quickly by, she felt her courage quickly revive again.

Every now and then she paused to listen: but no sound could she hear, save the moaning of the wind and the murmuring of the agitated waters of Lake Leman. Yes—the rustling of the leaves likewise did she hear, as the night-breeze sighed amidst the dewy verdure of the garden; and more than once she fancied that some one was about to rush forth upon her from amidst the trees. Lightly too as she tripped along, her footsteps raised echoes which fell upon her ear like the sounds of pursuit; and two or three times she turned abruptly round as if with the desperate resolution of facing some danger which she felt to be advancing from amidst the surrounding gloom. Ever and anon, too, an ice-chill like that of death would strike to her heart, as the idea struck her that a hand, heavy as that of the dead, was full likely to be laid upon her shoulder; and once or twice as an overhanging bough touched her she felt a sudden inclination to shriek out in the accents of intensest horror.

Thus, during the few minutes that it took the young lady to traverse the grounds from the back-entrance of the villa to the door in the wall opening on the bye-road, did she pass through a dozen different phases of exquisite agony;—and on gaining that door she leant against it for some minutes while she collected her disordered thoughts.

And now she listened with breathless attention once more: but no sound indicative of human approach met her ears. Slowly she moved away from the door, passing along a gravel walk which ran parallel with the wall. At every dozen yards she stopped to listen—but all in vain: and she already began to reflect whether it would not be better to take a bold and desperate step at once, rather than remain a prey to such harrowing suspense as the disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress had excited. That step which she now began to revolve in her mind, was neither more nor less than to proceed at once to Geneva—seek Dr. Maravelli's house, the address of which was known to her—and pursue her inquiries there. But at the very moment when she made up her mind to adopt this course, her foot struck against something that lay upon the footpath which she was pursuing. Whether it were a presentiment which seized upon her at the instant—or whether it were that the very nature of this contact with an object that felt soft as she kicked against it, made her divine what it was—we cannot say. Certain it is that a cold shudder shook her from head to foot, making her shiver as if an ice-blast had suddenly shed its influence upon her: but still, with a horrible curiosity, she stooped down to feel for the object in the path. Stronger still was the quivering that now shot through her from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, as her hand came in contact with the cold cheek of a tiny corpse!

But all in a moment the superstitious portion of her fears gave way to the sense of a new and more real danger. That it was her sister's dead child she could not doubt: nor dared she wait to ask herself how it could possibly have been left there. There was not a moment to be lost: the infant corpse must be disposed of at once! But how and where? Should she dig a hole in the garden and bury it? No: for the gardener, when coming at daylight, might chance to observe the earth newly dug up, and discovery would then be certain. Far more prudent were it to consign the corpse of the child to the depths of the lake; and then she and her sisters would at least have the consolation of knowing that the main evidence of the elder's shame was, as it were, annihilated.

The necessity for taking this step inspired Emma with the courage to carry it into execution. But how was she to issue forth from the grounds? If woman's wit, when sharpened by love, can laugh at locksmiths, so can her ingenuity when prompted by a sense of danger be rendered equally acute. It was true that the garden-door was locked: but then did she not know that her sister Julia had been wont to meet Curzon at a particular spot where a wooden bench stood on the inner side of the wall and the stump of a tree on the outer side? and had she not often observed those convenient stepping-places? To be sure!—and now quick as thought she availed herself thereof.

With the infant corpse under her arm, she scaled the wall and sped onward in the direction of the lake. A quarter of an hour's walk brought her to the shore; and pausing to listen, she could catch no sound of human voice or footstep. A leaden obscurity rested upon the lake—an obscurity which by the reflection that a large surface of water always throws up even in the midst of the darkest night,

was a shade less sombre than the surrounding blackness. With straining eyes did Emma seek to plunge her looks along the shore, both on the right and left hand, to see if any one were approaching; but she could distinguish nothing. Believing therefore that the opportunity was entirely favourable, yet feeling like a guilty wretch who is perpetrating a first heinous crime, with trembling hands did she grope about for a large stone; and with her handkerchief she attached it to the corpse. Then, with all her force—assisted by a sudden access of moral energy—she hurled the burthen as far as she could. It fell with a heavy plash; and the next instant her ears caught the gurgling sound of the miniature whirlpool produced by that tiny corpse sinking deep down to its watery sepulchre!

A feeling of relief sprang up in Emma's bosom; but scarcely had this sensation thus taken life, when it was turned into an almost mortal terror as a loud cry and a rush of footsteps burst forth from an old jetty a few yards off.

"Ah! caught at length!" were the words which, in accents of savage triumph and uttered in the strong tones of a male voice speaking in the French language, smote upon her ear: and in less than a minute she was surrounded by half a dozen men whose swords rattled in their sheaths as they sprang towards her.

"Why, it is a woman!" ejaculated another of the civic guard: for police-officers these individuals assuredly were. "It must be a mistake——"

"Well, but did you not hear the splash?" exclaimed he who had first spoken, and who was the sergeant of the band. "At all events, let the young person give an account of herself—who she is—where she comes from—what she is doing here, and what made that noise a minute ago in the water?"

"Officers," said Emma, driven by very desperation to the exercise of a fortitude the suddenness as well as the strength of which even surprised herself,—"I am here with no evil intention. It was a whim—a phantasy—a caprice on my part," she continued, speaking in excellent French, "to ramble on the border of the lake at this hour;—and as for the plashing sound which you heard, it was caused by a stone which in a listless mood I picked up and flung into the water."

"'Tis a lady, by the tone of her voice and the language she uses," said one of the officers.

"The greater the reason then," observed the sergeant, "that she should give a better account of herself. Ladies—that is to say, real ladies—don't come down here to walk at this time of night, or rather at such an hour in the morning. It is not at all probable: and though perhaps she is not one of those we have been waiting for, and perhaps has no connexion with them, we must nevertheless take her before the night-commissary."

"What!" almost shrieked forth Emma, now smitten with the cruellest—the wildest—the most agonizing terror: "take me before a magistrate?"

"Yes—most assuredly," rejoined the sergeant of police. "What alternative have we? Come, my men—away with her!"

Emma saw in a moment that remonstrance with the sergeant and his functionaries would be all in vain, and indeed would only be calculated to enhance their suspicions against her: but she felt confident that from the courtesy of the Genevese magistrates she had everything favourable to expect. Once more recalling to her aid and hugging as it were the fortitude wherewith she had previously armed herself, she said in a tone of calmness that contrasted strongly and strangely with her wild ejaculation of a few moments back,—"Since it is necessary that we go before a magistrate, I am willing to accompany you."

Away the party accordingly sped to the city; and in about a quarter of an hour they reached a police-station where the "night commissary," or magistrate whose turn it was to take the duty for the twelve current hours, was in attendance.

On being introduced into the common room of the station, Emma retained her veil carefully folded over her countenance, so as to avoid the curious gaze of the persons assembled there: but when she was conducted by the sergeant into the private room where the night-commissary sate, she immediately raised her veil in token of respect for that functionary.

The magistrate was somewhat startled at the revelation of such a charming countenance; and his eyes were at once turned upon the sergeant as if to inquire on what charge such a beautiful young lady could have been brought before him at such an hour.

"According to instructions received," said the sergeant, "I took half a dozen officers with me to keep a watch at that part of the lake where those rascally resurrectionists or fishers of men are in the habit of pursuing their avocation: because the old jetty causes a sort of tide to flow in at that part—and thus if there should happen to be a dead body in the lake, it is pretty sure to find its way to the spot I am speaking of——"

"Spare your details," interrupted the night-commissary; "and come to the point at once,—I mean your charge against this young lady."

"Well, sir, 'tis soon made," resumed the sergeant. "As I and my men lay concealed in the deep shade of the jetty—although heaven knows the night was dark enough everywhere—we heard a sudden splash; and thinking it was the resurrectionists flinging in their drag-hooks, we rushed out and discovered the prisoner. As she refused to give any account of herself, I brought her here."

"So far," said Emma, who had listened with a forced calmness to the sergeant's explanations, even to that portion which touched so ominously upon dead bodies finding their way into the hands of resurrectionists at the very spot where she had committed her sister's still-born child to the watery depths,—"so far from not giving this officer a proper account of myself, I expressly told him that I had wandered forth in a strange and unaccountable mood for a solitary ramble on the border of the lake, and that it was in a listless unpremeditated manner that I picked up a stone against which my foot struck, and tossed it into the water."

"I admit that the lady gave me these explanations," observed the sergeant; "but I did not consider them satisfactory—especially as her name and address were studiously withheld."

"The officer has but done his duty," said the magistrate, addressing Emma in a mild and courteous tone. "Without offering any comment upon your explanation of this unseasonable ramble at so strange a spot, I shall at once allow you to depart

upon your giving me some proof of your respectability."

"I have not the slightest objection," said Emma, without a moment's demur, "to give you my name and explain to you who I am and where I live. But inasmuch as an evil interpretation might be put on this very innocent proceeding of mine—I mean my unseasonable ramble—I need scarcely point out to you how much I am at your mercy relative to the amount of publicity you may give thereto. But throwing myself entirely on your generous consideration, I have no hesitation in confessing that my name is Emma Owen, and that I am one of the ladies belonging to the household of the Princess of Wales."

"This may be so—and I do not say that I doubt it," remarked the magistrate: "but still I must require some corroboration. Will you permit the sergeant to return with you to the villa inhabited by her Royal Highness the English Princess?—or will you send for some tradesman with whom you deal, to identify you?"

"Yes—I will adopt this latter course," said Emma, catching at the proposal.

Then, bethinking herself of a very civil and obliging linendraper with whom she and her sisters had spent a tolerable amount of money, she at once gave his address. The sergeant lost no time in proceeding to the establishment thus indicated; and arousing the linendraper from his slumbers, he returned with him in about twenty minutes to the police-station. There the tradesman at once identified Miss Owen; and the magistrate, expressing his satisfaction accordingly, proceeded to enter the minutes of the whole proceeding in the police-book. Emma availed herself of the opportunity of the commissary's attention being thus engaged, to slip a couple of pieces of gold into the sergeant's hand as an inducement for him to observe a profound silence relative to the singular adventure whereof she had just proved the heroine.

Thanking the magistrate for his courtesy towards her, Emma then took her departure, in company with the obliging linendraper, who insisted upon escorting her back to the villa. On their way thither, the wily girl invented some excuse to account for the dilemma in which she had been involved; and as she concluded her readily invented tale with a request that her companion would send three of his most exquisite pieces of Swiss silk to the villa next day, he did not think it worth while to make any comment on the young lady's representations or criticise them at all closely.

When within a short distance of the villa, she took her leave of him, thanking him for his kindness and promising to obtain for him the exclusive custom of the Princess during her stay at Geneva. The tradesman, overjoyed at an incident which promised such advantageous results, sped home again without a single regret at having been called up from his warm bed at such an hour.

It was now four o'clock in the morning—for Emma's absence had lasted exactly one hour and a half. It was quite light—and the bosom of the crescent lake reflected the pure azure of the heavens. Still the hill-sides in the vicinage of the lake, and the farther-off ascents of mountains, were veiled in the mists of morning—so that vineyards, hamlets, villas, and all the enchanting scenery belonging to that delightful region were clothed as it were in a gauzy dimness. But in the distance—far, far above those fleecy vapours—far, far above the mountain-mists—towered the Alpine peaks, shadowed forth in the horizon like magnificent skeletons crowned with their diadems of eternal snow. And high above them all arose Mont Blanc—a giant amidst giants—a colossus making even the surrounding colossal heights seem like pigmies, and looking like a pedestal on which the arch of heaven itself rested!

Yet little recked Emma for that sublime and wondrous panorama thus stretching itself out before her eyes. She was now full of anxiety how to obtain admission back into the villa. To scale the wall at the risk of being observed from the casements of the dwelling, or by the gardener himself, was impossible. To go boldly round to the front door and knock for admittance, as if she were returning from an early ramble, would be to create an immediate suspicion as to how she could have gone forth. For a few minutes she felt completely bewildered—when, to her joy, she observed the gardener coming forth with a wheel-barrow full of rubbish, from the door in the boundary-wall. Watching till he was at a convenient distance, she glided through that doorway into the grounds, and then boldly traversed them with the air of one who was merely taking an early walk.

No one however perceived her; and thus, without encountering a soul, did she re-enter the villa—ascend the back staircase—and steal her way, unobserved, to her sister Agatha's chamber.

Meanwhile Julia had been suffering indescribable torture on account of Emma's prolonged absence. But fortunately Agatha had slept on the whole time; and she was only now awakened by the return of Emma into the chamber. Slipping off her cloak and bonnet, Emma made a sign for Julia not to enter upon any disagreeable communication to Agatha, it being absolutely necessary that she should experience no annoyance nor shock to impede her progress towards a speedy convalescence. It was not therefore until Agatha fell into a sound slumber again—which she did in about half-an-hour—that Emma had an opportunity of explaining to Julia all that had occurred during her brief but momentous absence. And now conjecture was again rife with the two girls to account for the prolonged disappearance of Mrs. Ranger and the laundress, and the circumstance of the child having been dropped in the garden.

But we need not dwell upon the many hypotheses which Emma and Julia conjured up to account for those things which it was quite impossible could be thus accounted for by any surmise on their part. Hour after hour passed: they made themselves some breakfast—and they performed copious ablutions to bring back to their cheeks the roses which this long vigil and sleepless night had chased thence. At length, as the time-piece struck eight, the door of the chamber opened—and the lost Mrs. Ranger made her appearance!

She and Mrs. Hubbard had just returned from their forced expedition to Lausanne; and being set down by the post-chaise at a short distance from the villa, they had entered its precincts separately, and without attracting any particular attention on the part of the menials who were by this time all bustling about.

Many and varied, strange and exciting also, were the mutual explanations which now took place. Mrs. Ranger told her story first; and it was thence evident enough that Curzon and Malpas had intended the forcible abduction of Emma and Julia, for whom Mrs. Ranger and Mrs. Hubbard had been so ludicrously mistaken. The circumstance of the child being found in the garden by Emma was now also fully accounted for; and on the other hand, Mrs. Ranger was relieved of a poignant source of alarm on hearing that the infant corpse, instead of being left in the grounds, had been consigned to the bottom of the lake. In a word, it was agreed by the two young ladies and the old one, when all these explanations were concluded, that neither in truthful history nor in fictitious romance had a night ever occurred so full of varied, strange, and exciting adventures as the one that had just passed.

"But Mrs. Hubbard?" said Julia interrogatively: "what does she think now? what *must* she suspect?"

"She suspects nothing that we do not wish her to suspect," answered Mrs. Ranger. "In the first place, her ignorance of the French language prevented her from understanding anything that took place between me and the villain, whose name appears to be Kobolt, during the journey to Lausanne and back again hither. Moreover, when we found ourselves face to face with Curzon and Malpas at Lausanne, I so promptly stopped any unnecessary explanation, that Mrs. Hubbard gleaned not from their lips how it was yourselves, my dear Emma and Julia, whom they had intended to have carried off. The result is that Mrs. Hubbard has come back no wiser then she went relative to anything which we do not wish her to know. As for inventing some feasible explanation for the outrage thus perpetrated upon herself and me, and also for devising a motive to induce her to maintain a strict silence upon the subject——"

"Oh! we can trust you, my dear Mrs. Ranger, upon all those points," exclaimed Emma. "And though you and I have lost our lovers, Julia," she added, turning to her sister in a laughing manner, "we must congratulate ourselves on the turn which events have taken."

A few hours later—at eleven o'clock in the forenoon—her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was surrounded, as usual, in her breakfast-parlour, by her six ladies-in-waiting. Yes—there was not even an exception on this occasion with regard to Agatha Owen! Although but twelve hours had elapsed since she had experienced the pains of maternity, yet did she leave her couch—assume an elegant apparel—and appear in her accustomed place about the person of the Princess of Wales. But then the stimulant which Mrs. Ranger had given her was of such sovereign effect and invigorating qualities—the hand too of Mrs. Ranger had so skilfully applied an artificial shade of bloom to the young lady's pale cheeks—and the arrangements of her toilette were so well combined to prevent the appearance of any diminution in her shape—that it would have been impossible for even the most scrutinizing observer to entertain a suspicion of what had befallen Agatha within the last four-and-twenty hours.

Here, then, may we drop the curtain upon the fifth act of this drama of a night.

CHAPTER CXXXVII.

THE AVOWAL OF LOVE.

We must now again transport the reader's attention back to the English capital—the huge Babylon where millions of interests are ever jarring—where, notwithstanding a much-vaunted freedom, might is ever trampling upon right—and, with all its boasted civilization, society exhibits the barbarism of the industrious many being beggared to maintain the favoured few in luxurious indolence.

Yes—this is the city where the most tremendous anomalies, the most striking contrasts, and the most amazing inconsistencies cannot fail to arrest the gaze and rivet the attention. There worthlessness and immorality are seen in palaces, in mansions, at luxurious banquets, and in gilded equipages: while integrity and virtue are crushed unto the earth, trampled into the dust, forced into contact with crime, doomed to have their very nature changed, and then plunged into the workhouse or the gaol. There, in that modern Babylon, is the false god set up which three thousand years ago the King of ancient Babylon ventured to erect in the plain of Dura—that golden image which doubtless represented Mammon *then* and bears the name of Mammon *now*, and which all kneel down and worship of their own accord and without any bidding! Here, too, in this grand and mighty London of ours, which Britons proclaim to be not merely the metropolis of their own land, but of the entire world,—here, in this city, where art the most exquisite, science the most refined, discovery the most strange, and ingenuity the most persevering are ever multiplying their marvels, and heaping up wonder upon wonder—here is society cursed with the foulest moral leprosy that ever tyrannical institutions, infamous laws, and execrable social systems inflicted upon a community calling itself civilized.

But to our tale. About the same time that the events of the last few chapters were occurring on the shores of Lake Leman, the following scene took place at the mansion of Lord and Lady Florimel in Piccadilly.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon; and in the splendid drawing-room of that palatial residence sate Florence Eaton and Valentine Malvern.

The young lady was engaged in some elegant fancy-work, while the young gentleman was conversing with her—not in the frivolous style so common in aristocratic circles, nor upon the vanities, gaieties, and dissipations of the great metropolis. They were not discussing the attractions of the Opera—nor the merits of the newest piece produced at Covent Garden—nor the last brilliant party given by some splendid Duchess—nor the tittle-tattle, scandal, and flying rumours at that particular period constituting the "nine days' wonder" of the fashionable world. But that maiden so lovely and that youth so handsome were conversing on subjects which if not gay, were at all events not too grave—and if far from frivolous and light, were equally distant from being ponderous and dull. For the topics of their discourse were poetry, music, painting, and sculpture; and in exchanging their remarks thereon, they showed no affected love for something which

they could not understand, but a pure taste and a sound judgment in the appreciation of all the beauties of those sublime arts.

Upwards of four months had elapsed since Valentine Malvern, when thrown from his horse in Hyde Park, was conveyed in an unconscious state to Florimel House in Piccadilly. The physicians who were summoned at the time, ordered that he should be kept as tranquil as possible, lest concussion of the brain might supervene. Thereupon the hospitality of Lord Florimel, exercised with the due assent of his amiable Pauline, was so generously manifested towards the invalid that for upwards of a month did he remain beneath that roof. His recovery indeed was somewhat slow, as he had received a very severe shock from the accident: nor would Lord Florimel hear of his new friend leaving Piccadilly and returning to Hanover Square, until the medical attendant pronounced him convalescent.

As a matter of course, an acquaintance commenced under such circumstances was not likely to be disregarded by those concerned. Indeed, it was an acquaintance of the kind which, with congenial dispositions, soon ripens into friendship: and thus was it that an intimacy sprang up between Valentine Malvern and the Florimel family. His lordship and Pauline soon became much interested in this young gentleman, whose handsome countenance wore the impress of early sorrows, and whose disposition, naturally studious and thoughtful, was prematurely tinged with a melancholy shade. On the other hand, Valentine himself soon experienced a sincere admiration and profound respect for this noble couple, whose affections were so thoroughly centred in each other, and who after so many years of marriage seemed lovers still.

But we must not forget to state—and indeed the very progress of our tale requires that we should mention—the impression which Valentine Malvern

and Florence Eaton made upon each other. In this young maiden of nineteen did Valentine behold the personification of all the sweetest attributes belonging unto Woman. He found her endowed with a personal beauty the rarest, the most interesting—while of all the mental charms that can possibly ornament her sex, those of Florence were the truest, the choicest, and the best. On the other hand, though innocent as an angel and artless as the infant child—pure and spotless in soul as she was stainless and bright in her Madonna-like beauty—she could not remain insensible to the handsome person, the pleasing manners, the intellectual qualities, and the sterling virtues of Valentine Malvern. She beheld him mournful and unhappy on account of his father's still incomprehensible disappearance; and she naturally felt interested in one who, though of an age when the world's sun-light usually dissipates even the darkest clouds that gather around the heart, gave himself up to the absorbing fervour of that filial piety with which he continued to revere a lost parent's memory.

During the four months, then, that had now elapsed since Valentine Malvern first became acquainted with the Florimels, there had been ample leisure and full opportunity for himself and Florence Eaton, to know, to understand, and to like each other. The maiden's aunt and uncle beheld the progress of this affection between the young couple; and though they did nothing to encourage it, they were likewise careful against impeding its development. They had already resolved that whenever the time came for their well-beloved niece to enter the matrimonial sphere, the merits and not the rank, the virtues and not the social position of him on whom her affections might rest, should be taken into consideration. Therefore, when Florimel and Pauline observed that Florence was disposed to give her heart to a young man who not only possessed every mental qualification, but the advantages of rank and fortune into the bargain, they rejoiced unfeignedly. It was in secret, however, that they thus rejoiced: for they were resolved to allow their niece's attachment to take its own course, so that she might not, by receiving encouragement from them, prematurely assume that her *liking* was in reality a *love*.

But at the end of the four months of their acquaintance, Valentine Malvern, in a frank and candid manner, sought an opportunity of communicating to Lord and Lady Florimel the affection which he entertained towards their lovely niece. In thus revealing to them in the first instance the state of his feelings, he was actuated by the most honourable of motives: namely, to ascertain from them whether it would be agreeable that he should propose himself to the Honourable Miss Florence Eaton as a suitor for her hand. Lord and Lady Florimel at once expressed their full concurrence therein; and the circumstance of the reader's now finding the young gentleman and the youthful maiden alone together in the drawing-room, was in truth the opportunity which the uncle and aunt had purposely afforded for the avowal of love.

We said that during the first portion of this interview the conversation had dwelt upon those subjects which are the recreation of the truly healthful mind. But gradually did Valentine turn the discourse into that channel which was to bring to an issue the subject he had nearest and dearest at heart. Unconscious was the sweet Florence, in her girlish innocence, of the point to which her companion's remarks were at length tending: but when, with a due amount of delicate preparation and suitable preface, he ushered in the tender topic—Oh! how her heart began to palpitate in her bosom like a bird fluttering in its cage!—how the roseate hue went and came upon her damask cheeks!—and how strangely, almost overpoweringly, streamed forth upon her comprehension the floods of light from that temple of love the portals of which were now unfolding to her knowledge!

And then—oh! then—how ravishingly beautiful appeared the damsel, in this moment when a new source of happiness became known to her—when she understood the meaning of those sentiments that hitherto she had cherished unconsciously and unwittingly towards Valentine—and when her pure but enthusiastic soul was thus suddenly brought to a more vivid and rapturous comprehension than ever she had experienced before, of that æsthetic feeling which the poet has embodied in his verse, the painter has made to glow on his canvass, the sculptor has personified in his almost-breathing statue, and the musician has sent soaring up to heaven on the wings of divinest melody!

"Miss Eaton," said the young man, in those hushed and tremulous accents which, when vibrating with a masculine harmony and conveying the language of love, no young female can hear with impunity: "it is by the permission of your excellent uncle and aunt that I am thus permitted to address you. I do not fall at your feet—I do not give vent to impassioned language, full of vows, and pledges, and protestations: but not the less inspired with the deepest feeling and experiencing the profoundest emotion, I beg to offer you my hand as you already possess my heart!"

With downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, Florence Eaton proffered her own fair hand—thus mutely, yet Oh! how eloquently giving the affirmative answer to the suit which he had pleaded in terms so manly but in tones so tender.

"Thanks—ten thousand thanks, dearest, dearest young lady," said Malvern, as he took that fair hand and respectfully conveyed it to his lips: but though there was bashful hesitation in the manner in which he thus kissed the maiden's hand, there was nevertheless a thrill of ecstatic rapture in the accents wherein he conveyed his gratitude for the bestowal of it. "Florence," he continued, now calling her by her Christian name for the first time,—"again and again I thank thee!"

How sweet—Oh! how sweet to the maiden's ear is her own Christian name, when breathed for the first time by the lips of one who has just revealed the love that inspires his heart. Oh! the world has no happiness to compare with this! The most delicious music is dull and vapid in comparison with the melody of the lover's voice when softly syllabling the name of the adored one. Deep, deep into the soul it sinks—not with a force that jars upon the tender chords of the heart—but gentle and tender, as the balmy breeze laden with the perfume of roses steals upon the strings of an Æolian harp, awakening all the delicious pathos of its murmuring melody!

"You thank me for placing this hand in yours," said Florence, after a long pause and with a look of innocent fondness flung hastily upon her lover:

"but have I not also to thank you for thus selecting me from the many ladies of your acquaintance——"

"No, no," interrupted Valentine, with much concentrated enthusiasm in his tone: "'tis I who owe all the debt of gratitude unto you—for, without flattery and without compliment, 'tis an angel that thus promises herself to a humble mortal!"

In the strain which is usual with lovers in the first hour of their affection's avowal, did Valentine and Florence continue to discourse for some time; and at length the young man found himself touching upon a subject which stole in as it were painfully and darkly amidst his present dream of bliss, but on which he nevertheless deemed it requisite to deliver a few comments.

"You are aware, my dear Florence," he said, "that not a year has elapsed since the extraordinary and still unaccountable disappearance of my father. You behold me in mourning, because I believe him to be dead. Indeed, what circumstance save his death could possibly prove the solution of the present mystery? In the vigour of his manhood—endowed with all the choicest gifts of fortune—surrounded by affectionate friends—and having everything to render life agreeable, it is not for a moment to be believed that he could have voluntarily expatriated himself. The same reasons argue with equal strength against the supposition that he could have accomplished his self-destruction. What, then, must I suppose? Either that he met his death by accident; or that he was foully dealt with. But if it were indeed an accident, some trace would have survived—some clue would have remained—and none has ever been found. Alas! on what belief then must my conjectures settle? You can well understand, my dear Florence, how under such circumstances I am inspired by an ardent longing—a deep unappeasable yearning—to discover the author or authors of this dreadful crime, if such a crime have in reality been perpetrated. Therefore, in offering you my hand, it is requisite I should explain to you that although your image will ever henceforth be uppermost on the bright side of my thoughts, yet on the dark side will remain the memory of that sire whose blood seems to be crying up from some unknown spot for vengeance on those who shed it! Tell me, then—will you accept as your husband one whose thoughts will be thus to some extent divided—one who at any moment may have to rush away from your sweet society, to follow up some new track—some fresh clue that may develope itself?"

"Continue not this painful topic," said Florence, in a tremulous voice and with tears trickling down her cheeks. "The feelings which inspire you relative to your father, are most honourable—most admirable: and when it shall be my happiness to become your wife," she added, with blushing cheeks, "it will be my duty to encourage you in this filial research to which you have devoted yourself. Yes—and also to succour you in it to the utmost of my power!"

"Words cannot express the gratitude I feel towards you, Florence, for these assurances," said Valentine. "In the midst of the sorrow which has enveloped me as it were in a cloud, you have been sent to irradiate my path and cheer me with your angel presence. Pardon me—Oh! pardon me, if I have now by this conversation infused into your mind some of that gloom which hangs about my own soul: but I could not—I dared not—conceal a single thought nor a single feeling at a moment when our hearts should be revealed to each other and the fullest confidence should subsist between us."

"Yes—we should indeed mutually make known all our secrets," said Florence, suddenly becoming pensive and even melancholy—so that Malvern instantaneously perceived it was a mournfulness apart from that which his own language had a few minutes before been calculated to inspire. "Yes," she again observed, in a musing manner and with deepening pensiveness, "there must be no secrets between us: and therefore shall I unveil my thoughts upon a certain subject——"

She paused—and for a moment Valentine Malvern gazed upon her with surprise and curiosity: for he was naturally at a loss to conjecture what secret could be cherished in the bosom of a maiden who was not only so artless and so innocent, but who had likewise come so little in contact with the world.

"Ah! I perceive that you are already astonished at my words," said Florence, in a gayer tone, but yet with a half-subdued sigh: "and when I explain myself, you will doubtless think that I am very foolish—perhaps very wrong—to allow the incident to which I allude, to produce such an impression upon my mind. But in a few words can I explain myself."

Malvern was evidently listening with the utmost attention; and Florence proceeded in the following manner:—

"Four months have elapsed since the occurrence of which I am about to speak. At that time my aunt took me to St. James's Palace to view the State Apartments. In the Royal Closet we accidentally encountered the Prince Regent, who immediately appeared strangely excited on beholding me. Suddenly drawing forth a small miniature, he gazed upon it with a mingled melancholy and tenderness that I never can forget. It also seemed as if there were something like the agony of remorse in that expression which thus swept over his countenance: and methought that he compared the portrait which so deeply moved him, with my features. I felt amazed, and even startled; and feelings so strange and unaccountable that I cannot possibly describe them, sprang up in my soul. The Prince took my hand and said, '*Pardon me—pardon me, young lady: but you suddenly reminded me of a dear friend now no more.*' The words, as well as the look that accompanied them, have remained indelibly impressed upon my memory. At the time they filled me with confusion, and almost overwhelmed me with dismay: for the hand of the Prince trembled violently as he held mine, and he gazed upon me as if actually asking pardon for some fault which he had committed, or some injury that he had done me. I forgot at the moment that he was a Prince—and the feeling of awe inspired by his rank being thus temporarily suspended, I experienced a sudden but boundless compassion for that being who regarded me in such a manner. My aunt hurried me away to the Princess Sophia's apartments: we soon afterwards entered the carriage and drove into Hyde Park—on which occasion it was that the accident oc-

curred to yourself. From that day forth my aunt has never once alluded to the scene at St. James's Palace; nor have I mentioned it in her hearing. But I have nevertheless thought of it—yes, and thought of it often! It steals into my waking reflections by day, and mingles with my dreams by night. It appears to have interwoven itself with the threads of my destiny. Frequently do I reason with myself on the folly of thus attaching importance to an incident which was explained at the time—namely, my resemblance to a deceased friend of the Prince having so deeply moved him. But vainly do I thus reason: a mysterious voice seems to whisper in the profundities of my soul that there *is* an importance attached to that incident, and that its solution is *otherwise* than was represented. This idea has grown upon me: it has settled itself in my mind,—it has become a conviction against which no self-reasoning on my part can wrestle. Doubtless you will blame me—you will consider me to be very foolish——"

"Not so, Florence," observed Valentine, who had listened with the deepest interest to the strange but artless narrative which the young maiden had delivered with such frankness and candour. "The incident to which you have alluded, has evidently made a strong impression on your mind. Indeed, it has acquired the power of a spell or a superstition over you: and therefore your feelings are entitled to the utmost respect—especially on the part of one who aspires to the possession of your hand. But think you not that if the occurrence had really possessed any important significancy, beyond what it appeared to have,—think you not, I ask, that your aunt, who is all goodness and all kindness, would have cleared up the mystery to you?"

"Alas!" said Florence, shaking her head mournfully, and with the tears starting forth on her long lashes; "there are moments when I have experienced ungenerous and rebellious thoughts against my excellent aunt—that is to say, I have fancied that her silence relative to the incident at the palace has been a studied one, and that she has some special motive for avoiding all allusion thereto. If it were not for these ideas, which at times haunt me like darksome suspicions, I should have revealed to the ears of my aunt the thoughts and sensations which I have now revealed to you. I should have thrown myself into her arms and explained the wild, the singular, and the mysterious impressions which that incident has left upon my memory. But I dare not thus touch upon the subject before my aunt—a subject which methinks she studiously avoids: and for some weeks past a damp has fallen at times upon my spirits when I reflect that I am cherishing a secret unknown to those kind and generous relatives to whom I am so incalculably indebted."

"The revelation you have now made, gives me pain, Florence," said Valentine: "because I understand full well that this secret is preying upon you. You must endeavour to banish the impression from your mind——"

"No—that is impossible!" interrupted Florence, with accents of mournful firmness. "You have a belief that your lamented father has been the victim of a crime—and you cherish the presentiment that sooner or later you will be enabled to clear up the mystery. On my part I have a belief that the incident of St. James's Palace is in some manner interwoven with my destiny; and I cherish the presentiment that time will afford a full and complete explanation. Ah! Valentine," she said, after a few moments' deep reflection, and now suddenly fixing her eyes—those lovely azure eyes—upon the handsome youth who sat by her side, retaining one of her fair hands in his own—"when you ere now spoke to me of your desire to unravel the mystery which occupies so large a portion of your thoughts, did I not declare that to the extent of my humble ability—weak, timid, and powerless girl that I am—I would assist you?"

"O dearest Florence! now I comprehend you," exclaimed Valentine. "You wish that I should reciprocate the pledge, and that I should do my best to clear up this mystery which envelopes the incident of the palace—if a mystery there really be? I will do so—I will do so!"

The young maiden bent upon her lover a look beaming with gratitude; and they immediately turned their discourse upon topics of a more cheering character.

CHAPTER CXXXVIII.

VENETIA AND HER AGENT.

About ten days after the incidents which we have just related—and as the delicious month of April was verging towards a close—the last of a series of private dramatic performances was to take place at Carlton House.

Accordingly, between seven and eight o'clock on a certain evening, we shall find the beautiful Venetia dressing in her own chamber for the part which she was to take in the drama. The tasteful Jessica and another maid assisted at this toilette, which was so well calculated to display the grand and voluptuous charms of Lady Sackville to their fullest advantage. We need not, however, linger to describe her personal appearance on the occasion. Suffice it to say that she wore her auburn hair showering in ringlets over her naked shoulders so dazzlingly white, and that some natural flowers were the only ornament which appeared upon those hyperion locks. Her drapery, gauzy and transparent—low in the body and short in the skirt—revealed the luxuriance of her bust and all the symmetry of her limbs. Her arms were naked; and thus was the brilliant Venetia dressed—or rather undressed—in a manner the most voluptuous and the most provocative.

It was half-past seven—and the performances were to commence at eight. Her toilette was thus achieved in good time; and when it was completed she dismissed her maids and sate down to cast a look over her written part. But not many minutes did she remain thus alone: for Jessica re-appeared with the announcement that Colonel Malpas was in the drawing-room and requested an immediate interview.

"Ah!" ejaculated Venetia: "he is returned, then—and I will see him, if only for a few minutes."

She accordingly issued from her chamber and repaired to the drawing-room belonging to the suite of apartments which she and her husband oc-

cupied at Carlton House. In such haste was she to see the Colonel and hear from his lips the issue of his mission upon the continent, that she quite forgot at the moment the manner in which she was apparelled; and it was not until she actually stood in his presence and observed his eyes suddenly light up with a look of fervid devouring passion as she thus burst upon his sight, that she remembered how lightly she was clad. But being thus accustomed to display herself in those private dramatic representations wherein all the sensualities of the public stage were so shamelessly imitated, she experienced no bashfulness as the circumstance of her semi-nudity was thus recalled to her mind. Indeed, she could not be disposed to experience any more shame in thus displaying herself to the eyes of Malpas, than she did when appearing on the mimic stage before her select patrician audience.

The effect, however, thus produced upon Colonel Malpas was as powerful as it was instantaneous. The sudden appearance of that woman so superbly handsome, in such a luxurious undress and in the roseate light which flooded the splendidly-furnished drawing-room, was enough to arouse the passions of even a more sober-minded individual than Malpas and excite them to a frenzied degree. He had always regarded her as supremely beautiful from the very first: he had looked upon her as the most desirable creature he had ever set eyes upon—but now she seemed to burst upon his view clothed with a loveliness so transcending in its brilliancy, so overpowering in its grandeur, so intoxicating in its influence, that small marvel was it if the fires of the Colonel's sensual cravings thus flamed up all in a moment to a maddening degree.

"Sit down, Colonel Malpas," said Venetia, immediately assuming an aspect of dignified reserve as she waved her hand towards a seat: then placing herself on a sofa at a little distance, she hastened to observe, "We have private theatricals here this evening—and hence the garb which doubtless strikes you as strange."

"Not strange, your ladyship—but as wondrously becoming," said the Colonel, in a tone insidiously complimentary. "To speak with candour, indeed, I never saw your ladyship to such advantage before—so dazzlingly handsome—so exquisitely charming——"

"Enough, sir!" exclaimed Venetia, her countenance flushing with indignation: but as the crimson tide not only mantled upon her cheeks, but also poured over her softly rounded shoulders and her heaving bosom, she looked all the more grandly beautiful, and the Colonel's passions were excited if possible to a more frenzied pitch. "Our interview must on the present occasion be brief," she continued, in a tone that was intended to overawe the Colonel, and make him feel that though she had used him as the agent of her schemes, she utterly hated and despised him: "tell me, therefore, in a word, what you have done—and to-morrow you can call again and give me the details."

"I am sorry to inform your ladyship that I have done nothing effective," answered Malpas.

"Nothing!" echoed Venetia, with mingled surprise and indignation: "absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing, my lady—absolutely nothing," responded Malpas, not adopting so humble a tone as when he was last in her presence. "I shall not attempt to deceive you; and therefore I must at once confess that in spite of all the various plans and manœuvres I adopted, nothing has been done."

"And yet," exclaimed Venetia, now appearing pale with anger not only at this acknowledgment of utter failure on the Colonel's part, but likewise because she noticed a sort of flippancy and assurance in his tone which she was not altogether at a loss to understand,—"and yet in your letters you assured me that one of the Owens had become your mistress."

"True enough, my lady," rejoined the Colonel: "but equally true it is that so far from my being able to make use of that connexion in a manner serviceable to the objects of my mission, I do really believe that I myself was rendered a dupe and an instrument by the young lady. To be brief, Lord Curzon——"

"Ah! you have met then?" exclaimed Venetia: but instantly recovering her presence of mind, she said, "Proceed—I was interrupting you."

"Well, the truth is soon told, Lady Sackville," said Colonel Malpas, with increasing assurance alike of tone and manner. "Lord Curzon and I *did* meet at Geneva, and we became as good friends as ever. In fact, there was a complete understanding established between us——"

"That is to say," remarked Venetia, in a cold tone, but subduing her rage and vexation only with a most powerful effort,—"that is to say, you revealed to his lordship the object of your mission as well as the name of her who sent you—and he gave you a similar explanation. Was it not so?"

"It was," answered Malpas: and now his eyes actually flamed as they dwelt devouringly and gloatingly upon the splendid person of Venetia.

"I ought to have foreseen that they would have thus met," she thought within herself. "But after all, no harm can possibly result from such an encounter. Curzon would not have betrayed his intimacy with me!"—then suddenly casting her eyes upon Malpas, and observing the unmistakable longings of desire that glowed in his looks, she said with a haughty dignity, "You will be so kind as to call upon me to-morrow at noon—and we will converse farther upon these matters."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Sackville," said Colonel Malpas, suddenly assuming a tone and manner of insolent assurance and dogged authority: "there is no time like the present—for when I come to-morrow, it is just as likely as not that the hall-porter will declare your ladyship to be invisible. I dare say you have five minutes to spare—in that five minutes all can be said that need be said."

From the first moment of Venetia entering that drawing room upon the present occasion, her eyes had lost the amorous langour which was habitually wont to fill them and partially to weigh down the thickly-fringed lids. But gradually as Malpas proceeded with this last speech, in which he so completely threw off the mask, and not merely hurled defiance at the lady, but seemed to feel a consciousness of power over her,—the steady calmness that had displaced the langour of her gaze, flamed up into a burning look which flung its vivid lightnings upon the man who thus dared to insult her.

"You appear more gloriously handsome than ever," said Colonel Malpas, wincing somewhat for a moment before that blaze of wrathful feeling: but recollecting that, after all, it was but a woman against whom he was now waging war, he became valorous once more. "A few minutes back," he continued, "you looked as calmly dignified and as elegantly stately as the Goddess Diana: but now you seem superb and terrible as Juno the Queen of Heaven."

"Leave the room, sir!" exclaimed Venetia, rising from her seat and catching hold of the bell-cord. "Remain another instant and I summon the lacqueys to thrust you forth!"

"Ah! would you dare heap insults on me again?" cried Malpas, also springing from his chair: then with a look of malignant triumph, he said, "Madam, you are in my power—utterly in my power: and you would do well to come to terms with me."

"In your power, sir—it is ridiculous!" ejaculated Venetia in a tone of scorn and with a look of withering indignation: but still she did not pull the bell, for she felt that she was not standing on the securest ground possible in respect to Malpas. "You doubtless think," she continued to observe, "that because I have entrusted you with a delicate and secret mission, you have acquired a certain authority over me—and you imagine to work upon my fears?"

"You speak the exact truth," said Malpas: "and remember that if we have now come to serious language, it is your ladyship who has provoked it."

"Penniless, wretched, and miserable," said Venetia, in a bitter tone, "did you issue from a debtor's gaol; and the first person to whom you applied was the very last to whom you should have so addressed yourself. Nevertheless, I took you by the hand—I gave you employment—I put gold into your pocket: and now you seek to turn round upon me, viper that you are! But I will trample you beneath my heel—I will crush you as I would a worm—I will cover you with confusion, infamy, and disgrace!"

As Venetia thus spoke, her form seemed to dilate—her stature heightened—her bust expanded—her cheeks mantled with the deepest carnation—her eyes vibrated like stars—her beauty became alike grand and terrible.

"Oh! since you treat the matter thus," said Malpas, "let us understand each other. Think you that I have ever forgotten, or could have ever forgiven, the tremendous exposure which took place when the Banquet of Six was given at my house? No—by heavens, it was a barbed arrow that rankled in my heart! And yet I never thought—I never even ventured to hope—that the day would come when I should be avenged. It did not seem possible that such good fortune was in store for me. On issuing from prison, I addressed myself to you in my despair: but it was not through friendship—no, not even with so beggarly a feeling as charity—that you condescended to return a favourable answer to my petition. You wanted an individual who was to become your instrument—your tool—your catspaw in playing a certain game in the affairs of the Princess of Wales. What your object was, heaven only knows—and I care not. Suffice it for me to say that I am so deep in your confidence as to hold you completely in my power——"

"Ah! think you," interrupted Venetia, who had listened with glowing cheeks, flashing eyes, and scornful lips to the Colonel's long speech,—"think you that I reck for these implied menaces on your part? Do I not know that gold is all you require—and that your present proceeding is naught but a scandalous mode of extortion? Having failed in your mission, you fancied that I should overwhelm you with reproaches and refuse you any remuneration for such efforts as you may have made in the affair: you therefore think to forestall my anger by this cowardly demonstration on your part. Now tell me what is the amount you require. Name it!—then away with you, and let me see your face no more!"

"Not so fast, my lady, if you please," said Malpas, with an air of cool unconcern, as if he knew that he was enabled to dictate his own conditions and that Venetia dared not refuse compliance therewith. "I am not altogether mercenary, although money is certainly an article that I require and which I mean to have, and to a tolerable handsome amount too! But your ladyship possesses other attractions beside your wealth——"

"Colonel Malpas," said Venetia, concentrating all the lightnings of her looks upon the individual who stood before her,—"let this scene end at once! I have neither time nor inclination to prolong it. It wants but ten minutes to eight—and at eight my presence will be required elsewhere. Therefore name the sum that you require; it shall be forthcoming at any hour to-morrow. But if you dare breathe another word derogatory to my feelings as a woman, I at once break off all compromise and leave you to do your worst."

"We shall see," observed Malpas, flippantly. "Ten minutes more—eh," he continued glancing at the time-piece: "in that ten minutes everything may be settled amicably between us. You do not seem to comprehend the position in which you stand. In the first place, what would his Royal Highness say if I were to inform him that you have been plotting and planning to counteract all his plots and plans——"

"He would not believe you," responded Venetia, in a tone of apparent confidence; although she did not feel quite so certain on the subject as she chose to appear—and it was this misgiving that rendered her in reality anxious to put a golden seal upon the Colonel's lips. "Judging by your antecedents, the Prince knows you to be capable of the foulest falsehood. Therefore go and tell his Royal Highness what you choose! He would only wonder how you came to learn that there was any conspiracy in existence at all against the Princess: but he would not believe you even on oath, were you to declare that you obtained that knowledge from me—much less that I had actually employed you to counteract the progress thereof."

"Well," exclaimed Malpas, a diabolical smile of satisfaction again appearing upon his features, "your ladyship now drives me to extremes. If the Prince would not believe all those matters which you have detailed, is it any reason that he should disbelieve me if I assured him that his beautiful mistress, on whose head he has heaped wealth and honours, has bestowed her favours on the Earl of Curzon?"

Venetia staggered as if struck by the sudden blow of a hammer; and while every shade and

tint of vital colouring disappeared, leaving her cheeks pale as alabaster, she sank back upon the sofa whence she had risen a few moments previously. It was an awful consternation—a frightful dismay that had seized upon her. Until this moment she had believed that Curzon, though an unprincipled libertine and a reckless profligate, as most aristocrats are, was nevertheless high-souled and generous enough to keep the secret of an affair of gallantry as inviolably as if life itself depended on it. But no: it was evident that Curzon was a traitor, and that by his treachery her honour was now placed at the mercy of Colonel Malpas, the most finished scoundrel that ever belonged to fashionable society.

"Your ladyship sees that I am not to be trifled with," he said, inwardly exulting at the confirmation which his bold averment had just received in the effect it produced upon Venetia.

"The Earl of Curzon is a traitor," she said, after a long pause, during which it cost her more than one effort to regain her self-possession. "But come, sir—what is it you require? And if ever," she added in a tremulous tone, "you knew how to spare the feelings of a lady, I beseech you to do so now."

"My terms are speedily named," replied Malpas: then fixing his looks upon her in a manner which showed him to be inexorable, he said, "Five thousand guineas in the first place—and in the second, the same favour which you have bestowed upon the Earl of Curzon!"

Venetia started, although she had foreseen what was coming: and fixing her eyes upon the Colonel she was about to entreat his mercy as to the latter condition, when a sudden idea struck her.

"You are resolved upon enforcing these terms?" she said, in a cold voice and with a look that suddenly became settled and steady.

"I am resolved," he answered, thinking she had made up her mind to the worst. "Nothing can shake my determination."

"Then must it be as you say," observed Venetia. "To-morrow night, at eleven o'clock, you must be at the private door opening from the palace into the park; and my maid Jessica will give you admittance."

"Ah! but how do I know that the door will really open to admit me?" exclaimed Malpas. "Once get out of a palace, and it is not so easy to get in again."

"Am I not completely in your power?" asked Venetia. "If I accede to the conditions you have laid down, it is to purchase your secrecy. Think you, then, that if I chose to defy you I could not as well do it at once by ordering you to quit the palace, as to-morrow night by refusing to re-admit you into it?"

"True!" said Malpas, who saw plainly enough that Venetia felt herself to be really and truly in his power. "At eleven o'clock to-morrow night I shall be at the private door which you have named."

He then bowed and hastened from the room,—Jessica being in readiness on the landing to conduct him unobserved out of the palace: for she knew full well that he had been employed by her mistress in some secret matters, and that it was by no means desirable for him to be seen and recognised within those walls, inasmuch as it would naturally strike either the Prince Regent or Lord Sackville as remarkably strange that Venetia should hold any intercourse with a man who had played so vile a part towards her on former occasions.

Yes—and bitterly, bitterly, too, did Venetia repent the precipitation and rashness with which she had thus renewed her acquaintance with the Colonel. But there was now no remedy for it: the mischief was done—and she must either ward off the consequences if she could, or mitigate them as much as possible.

But, Ah! eight o'clock strikes: it is time for her to repair to the Green Room and join the throng of amateurs who are to appear upon the stage on the present occasion. Starting from her seat, Venetia looked at herself in the glass. The colour was coming back to her cheeks; and as she rapidly pictured to herself the enthusiasm with which her presence was about to inspire the patrician audience in the private theatre, a smile of triumph shone upon her features. Indeed, when she repaired to the Green Room, so animated were her looks—so gay was her smile—and so sprightly her wit, that no one would have fancied to what a degree of tension her feelings had been strung during the last half-hour.

CHAPTER CXXXIX.

A SINGULAR PROPOSAL.

In the afternoon of the following day—just as the Marquis of Leveson was sitting down to lunch—a carriage drove up to the door of his mansion in Albemarle Street. Glancing forth from the window, he observed that it was Lady Sackville's equipage; and in less than a minute, after the loud double knock had been given, one of his domestics entered to announce that her ladyship requested to speak to him for a single moment at her carriage-window.

The Marquis, instantaneously suspecting that his functions of self-constituted banker were about to be put into requisition again, chuckled within himself as he sped forth in compliance with the message he had just received: and assuming his most courteous demeanour, he approached the carriage.

Now, as a tall powdered lacquey, who had descended from behind the vehicle the moment it stopped, was stationed so close that he could overhear whatever took place between his mistress and the Marquis, she was of course compelled to be upon her guard. Accordingly, placing a small packet in the nobleman's hand, she said, "Sackville desired me to stop at your lordship's door, as I passed this way in the carriage, and deliver this packet into your own hand. I believe it is something valuable," she added, flinging a rapid and significant look upon the Marquis: "and, by the bye, I think he told me there might be something to come back."

"Yes—a letter of acknowledgments and thanks for what his lordship has thus sent me," responded the Marquis; "and which is doubly acceptable on account of being delivered by your ladyship's own fair hands. I will not ask your ladyship to walk in, as Lady Ernestina is not at home."

"Indeed, I am somewhat pressed for time also,"

observed Venetia, affecting an air as courteous as if she were really on friendly terms with the nobleman and his niece, instead of loathing the former and hating the latter as heartily as possible.

"I will not detain your ladyship two minutes," said the Marquis: and he hastened back into the mansion.

Ascending to his own chamber, he immediately examined the little packet which Venetia had placed in his hand; and he found that it contained ten of the pearls off the string of a hundred which he had presented to her.

"This makes fifteen that have already come back to me," he said to himself as he opened his writing-desk. "I wish that fellow Tash would manage to lead Sackville into deeper extravagances; but the Captain declares that Horace is not so easy to be thus entangled. Still he is launching out into certain expenses which will soon involve him—and Tash says that he has some expensive affair of gallantry in hand too, but he does not know with whom. I wonder whether Venetia wants this money for her husband?"

Thus musing, the Marquis of Leveson drew forth ten Bank-notes each to the amount of a thousand pounds, and enveloping them in a sheet of paper, he sealed it and addressed it to *Lord Sackville.* Then, descending with it in his hand, he delivered it at the carriage-window to Lady Sackville, in such a manner that the footman who stood close by might read the direction, so that all suspicion of anything clandestine between himself and her ladyship would be averted.

The equipage drove away: and as it proceeded back to Carlton House, Venetia thought within herself, "Positively this must be the last time that I apply to that detested nobleman for pecuniary assistance. And yet he managed it delicately enough, so that the servants could not for an instant suspect there was anything strange in my calling at Leveson House."

On alighing at the palace, Venetia was informed that a lady had called by appointment and was waiting in the drawing-room. A ray of satisfaction lighted up her ladyship's lovely countenance: but before she proceeded to join her visitress in the saloon, she ascended to her boudoir. There she tore open the letter which the Marquis had put into her hand; and having satisfied herself that it contained the notes, she put five of them into her purse, and secured the other five in her writing-desk. Then, having laid aside her carriage-dress, she repaired to the drawing-room where the lady was waiting for her, and concerning whom we must pause to say a few words.

This lady was about three-and-twenty years of age, and was tolerably good-looking. She had fine hair of a dark brown colour—delicate features, which, without being exactly regular, were interesting—fine eyes—and a very beautiful set of teeth. Her figure was finely formed—indeed upon a somewhat large scale when considered in reference to the delicacy of her countenance. Altogether, she was of attractive appearance; and though quiet, genteel, and lady-like in her manners, she had not the polish of what is called "the best society." In that society she had nevertheless mingled for a time, but had not altogether caught its exquisite gloss: indeed it was not very difficult to perceive that she properly belonged to a sphere not so elevated. At the same time there was nothing vulgar about her: she was dressed with taste and what might be termed elegant neatness. Her voice was pleasing; and a slight tinge of melancholy gave additional interest to the expression of her countenance.

This lady was Mrs. Malpas, the daughter of a retired butcher: but she herself had never had any connexion with the details of the business, having, on the contrary, been brought up in the manner which is usual with a rich tradesman's family. That is to say, she had received a good boarding-school education, so far as instruction and accomplishments went: but she had also learnt a great deal of boarding-school nonsense. It was the influence of such sickly sentimentalism as this that was destined to rule the principal actions of her life, as the reader will soon see. She was the elder of several sisters (for she had no brothers); and had been left an heiress by an old bachelor uncle who accumulated a fortune in the pork and sausage line. When she left boarding-school and was duly "brought out" at a Mansion House entertainment, she of course engaged the notice of many admirers. But her fortune was the principal, if not the sole attraction. Amongst her suitors were Colonel Malpas and the redoubtable Captain Tash. At that special moment the affairs of the former stood in particular need of a patching-up by means of a good matrimonial alliance; and as for the latter, there was no moment better than another for a fortune to fall into his hands. At first the young lady was inclined to listen most favourably to Captain Tash, because he not only had a tremendous pair of moustaches, but also the finest pair of whiskers possible—whereas Colonel Malpas had but a delicate moustache and slight whiskers. But when it was made known to the sentimental young lady that the Colonel was of much higher rank than the Captain—that the former really moved in the best circles, whereas the latter only obtained admittance to them by an occasional accident—that the former was actually in the Guards, while the latter was on half-pay or else on no pay at all—she at once decided in favour of the Colonel and cut the Captain. Now Tash was not the man to stand this. He raged, fumed, bullied, and threatened to commit a wholesale slaughter in Butcher-hall Lane, where the family resided. The young lady's father had him bound over to keep the peace: but the Captain, in defiance of his recognizances, sent a challenge to Colonel Malpas. This the Colonel would not accept, but had the Captain locked up in prison for breaking the peace. However, the indefatigable Tash found bail again—emancipated himself from captivity—and threatened to expose the Colonel's cowardice at every club in London. He even contrived to obtain a clandestine interview with the young lady, and made such an impression on her by his representations of the Colonel's poltroonery and his own remarkable valour, that the sentimental Miss, who had just been reading a romance of chivalry, thought that the Captain was after all the hero into whose arms she ought to fling herself. A run-away match was therefore agreed upon: but the parents discovered all—the Colonel was communicated with—and the young lady, over-persuaded once more, agreed to accompany Malpas at once to the altar. While

the marriage ceremony was taking place, a discreet friend of the family sought an interview with Captain Tash, and broke to him the terrible tidings how he was thus forestalled by the Colonel after all! The gallant Captain pummelled the discreet friend within an inch of his life, and then consented to receive a couple of thousand guineas as an inducement never to molest either the worthy folks in Butcher-hall Lane or the newly-married couple any more.

Such were the romantic and mysterious circumstances attending the alliance of Colonel Malpas and the porkman's heiress. In the hurry which characterised the proceedings, and in the "old people's" eagerness to save their daughter from the formidable adventurer, Captain Tash, and bestow her upon the aristocratic Malpas, no precaution had been taken to tie up her fortune in any way beneficial to herself. Malpas therefore obtained the whole and sole control thereof. But then the young lady's parents thought that all British officers were men of honour, and that the higher the rank the more superlative the honour: so that those good, easy, and addle-pated City folks had fancied at the time that Colonel Malpas of the Guards must be the very acme of honour itself. The parents and the daughter all learnt the contrary to their cost; and when the young lady's fortune was spent—her husband a prisoner—the splendid mansion in Marlborough-street stripped from attic to kitchen by the unholy hands of sheriffs'-officers—and she herself obliged to return home to her parents in Butcher-hall Lane, the said parents began to suspect that it would have been much better if their daughter had espoused Mr. Simon Snuggs, the saddler, than Colonel Malpas of the Guards. But the young lady did not come to the same wise conclusion from past experience. On the contrary, she regretted the loss of the fine house in which she was

her own mistress; and though she hated her husband and would not even open any of the letters he from time to time addressed to her, yet her bitterness towards him resulted rather from rancour at being expelled from her paradise through his extravagances, than from the fact of his heartless conduct towards her. So that if he had suddenly become possessed of a fortune and had asked her to return to him, she would gladly have done so: or, on the other hand, if she herself picked up another dowry, she would very likely have sent to inform the Colonel of the fact and invite him to return and enjoy it with her.

Such was Mrs. Malpas, the lady who now called upon Venetia in pursuance of a note forwarded by the latter to Butcher-hall Lane in the forenoon.

"I have not had the honour of your acquaintance before," said Lady Sackville, adopting her most courteous demeanour and affable tone; "but I am rejoiced to have the present opportunity of forming it. Doubtless you were surprised to receive a note from me at all; but much more so to perceive by its contents that I have business of the utmost importance to speak upon. In that note I also suggested that you should maintain as strict a secrecy as possible relative to the fact of receiving it——"

"And I can assure your ladyship," said Mrs. Malpas, "that I did so. I happened to be alone at the time when the note was delivered; and neither my father nor mother are aware of my receiving it. I could not hesitate to obey the summons at the hour appointed, considering the kind and condescending tone in which the letter was written. Therefore, even before your ladyship breathes a syllable of the business alluded to, I beg to tender my sincerest thanks for your goodness towards me."

"My dear Mrs. Malpas," said Venetia, making the lady sit down upon the sofa by her side, and treating her with the familiar condescension so flattering to her vanity; "I am delighted to perceive that you appreciate beforehand my good intentions and friendly objects. Indeed, it is upon a very serious and delicate matter that I wish to discourse with you; and were you my own sister, I could not entertain a more sincere sympathy than I do towards you in respect to the unfortunate position in which you stand with regard to your husband—for it is on *this* point that we must deliberate."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Malpas, in evident surprise, "I fancied from something I had heard that your ladyship had every reason to entertain a serious animosity against my husband."

"What was it that you heard?" asked Venetia: "and from whom did you hear it? Let the fullest confidence subsist between us."

"By all means," exclaimed the Colonel's wife, delighted at thus entering so speedily upon such familiar terms with the reigning star of fashion. "In answer, then to your ladyship's questions, I must inform you that Captain Tash, whom I accidentally met a few week's ago——"

"Ah! I understand," said Venetia, who knew full well that the Captain was acquainted with Mrs. Malpas.

Indeed, it was from the Captain's own lips—he having lately become a tolerably frequent visitor at Carlton House—she had gleaned all those particulars which we have ere now sketched, and which were so well calculated to give Venetia an insight into the character of Mrs. Malpas. We may add, it was from a knowledge of this character that Venetia had resolved upon the adoption of the course which she was now pursuing with respect to that lady.

"Captain Tash told me," continued Mrs. Malpas, "that my husband had been guilty of some very insulting conduct towards your ladyship, but the nature of which he did not explain."

"Were you not aware," asked Venetia, "that I once visited your house in Great Marlborough Street—on a certain night when Colonel Malpas entertained the Prince Regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and others?"

"I heard something to that effect," responded Mrs. Malpas: "but I passed that memorable day—for such indeed it was to me—with my parents; and when I returned home to Great Marlborough Street in the evening, I found everything in such confusion that I took but little note of the rumours which met my ears. One fact was overwhelming enough—that ruin had overtaken my husband——"

"Well," interrupted Venetia, "we need not refer particularly to the past. It is however necessary for me to explain that Colonel Malpas had the presumption to declare his love for me at the period of which we have been speaking——"

"I heard something to that effect," said Mrs. Malpas: "and really when I look at your ladyship, I am not surprised that any gentleman should fall in love with you. I could forgive my own husband for doing so, even were I devotedly attached to him."

"I must thank you for this compliment," said Lady Sackville, smiling. "But permit me to ask whether Captain Tash ever informed you of the part which he played——"

"I heard," interrupted Mrs. Malpas, "that the Captain inflicted severe chastisement on my husband the night of the banquet at Great Marlborough Street; and I also understood that it was in consequence of some boasting assertion, as unfounded as it was impudent, made by the Colonel in reference to your ladyship. How true all this might be, I scarcely knew: for I was well aware that Captain Tash entertained a bitter hatred against the Colonel and would gladly seek an opportunity to avenge himself."

"You occasionally see the Captain, then?" said Venetia, beginning to suspect that there might be some little intrigue on the part of that gallant officer and the Colonel's wife.

"No, my lady," was the answer, delivered with an unaffected sincerity which instantaneously showed Venetia that her suspicion was altogether unfounded. "I have only met him once for months past—and that was by accident. I was walking with two of my sisters at the time. Perhaps your ladyship has heard that before I was married to the Colonel, Captain Tash made me an offer; but I am glad now—heartily glad—that I did not accept it. The stories I have heard of his dreadful violence—his outrageous conduct—the constant scrapes he is getting himself into—and his dissipated mode of life, are enough to frighten one and would have been the death of me: for I am

quite sure that all I have suffered through Malpas has not been half so bad as I should have endured if I had married Captain Tash."

"The Captain is a good-hearted man," said Venetia, "but has all the bad qualities you mention. However, we have wandered from the topic of our discourse: and now, to resume it, I must observe that you are acquainted with a sufficiency of past events to understand how I had every reason to dislike your husband. Nevertheless, when he obtained his release from gaol some four months ago, I took compassion on him—I employed him in a secret mission to the Continent; —and now that he has returned to London——"

"He is in London, then, at present?" exclaimed Mrs. Malpas. "I heard that he had gone abroad, but knew not of his return."

"He is only just come back," rejoined Venetia; "and I regret to say that his disposition is not changed for the better. Availing himself of the knowledge of certain secrets, which I should be sorry to have revealed—secrets, however, you must understand, of a purely business character—he has dared to use menaces and threats towards me——"

"But for what purpose?" asked Mrs. Malpas, whose comprehension was not the quickest and the brightest in the world.

"Ah! with reluctance and sorrow do I unfold the truth to the injured wife of that unprincipled man," said Venetia, affecting a kind compassion towards her new acquaintance. "Nevertheless, the truth must be revealed—and when I tell you that Colonel Malpas seeks to compel me to submit to his will by means of threats, coercion, and terrorism——"

"Oh! this is shocking—this is dreadful!" cried Mrs. Malpas. "What must be done? how shall we act? He must be thwarted—he must be reduced to submission—you must be protected."

"That is precisely what I have been thinking," observed Venetia. "And indeed," she continued, after a little hesitation, "I had a certain plan in view——"

"Name it—name it," said Mrs. Malpas; "and if in any way I can assist your ladyship, you may rely upon my good offices."

"But before I explain myself," continued Venetia, "you must answer me a question. Do you feel disposed to live again with your husband, provided the means were supplied to furnish another establishment for you, and a handsome sum of ready money supplied to enable you to commence housekeeping again?—would you, in a word, leave your father's dwelling and return to the society of your husband under such favourable circumstances?"

"Yes—under such favourable circumstances," answered Mrs. Malpas, echoing Venetia's words. "Besides, if your ladyship recommends the adoption of that course, I at once agree to it," she added seriously.

"Then listen to my plan," said Venetia, inwardly rejoicing at the lady's response. "You must make some excuse to your parents to be enabled to return to me this evening, and pass the night beneath this roof. When the Colonel makes his appearance—which he will do—to claim from me an answer to his dishonourable suit, he shall be conducted to the room where you will be already installed; and I will take care that the door shall be closed upon him on the outside. You will thus pass the night together—and you will have an opportunity of giving him a real curtain lecture——"

"But such a lecture will be utterly thrown away upon him!" interrupted Mrs. Malpas. "He will only ridicule and laugh at me——"

"You do not exactly understand the nature of the lecture which you are to give to him," said Venetia. "I am well aware that to appeal to his moral feelings as a husband or as a man, will be utterly useless: but to appeal to his selfishness may produce quite a different effect. You will tell him, then, that you are now upon intimate terms with me, and that it is my intention to introduce you into the highest circles and the best society. You will go on to observe that your father has agreed to allow you a thousand a-year to live upon, and has given you five thousand guineas to furnish a mansion and commence the world anew, in order that you may live in independence, happiness, and comfort."

"But my father has done no such thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Malpas, in astonishment: "and he would not do anything of the kind."

"No—but I will do it all for you," answered Venetia; "and you can attribute it to your parents' kindness——"

"But such goodness on your part," cried Mrs. Malpas, in amazement: "is it possible—are you joking——"

"It is no subject to jest upon," returned Venetia. "My dear friend," she continued, "can you not understand the object that I have in view? Your husband not only demands the surrender of my person, but also seeks to extort a large sum of money from me. Now you will not be angry if I declare that I so thoroughly hate and cordially detest your husband, that I would sooner die than yield to his wishes on the first point—while, on the second, it would only encourage him to further extortion if I were to comply with his demand. You can now understand that it is well worth my while to adopt *any* course in order to save myself from that humiliation and that danger; and by the plan I am suggesting, you can likewise be restored to a position of comfort, respectability, and independence, without having to drag along your existence in Butcher-hall Lane."

"Then what would your ladyship have me do?" asked Mrs. Malpas, now beginning to see clearly, like one who emerges from a dense fog.

"I would have you recite to your husband," continued Venetia, "the tale which I have ere now devised for the purpose—how I have taken you by the hand—how you are to be introduced at Court—how you have succeeded in inducing your father to make you independent—and how, for the sake of appearances, you are willing to forgive the past and dwell once more with your husband. He will greedily embrace your offer. The assurance that you possess an income of a thousand a-year, will bring him to your feet and make him promise to treat you with all possible kindness henceforth. But when you find him thus pliant and ductile, you must tell him that there is *one* condition which you have to impose as the basis of a future good understanding between you: namely, that inasmuch as you have conceived the utmost friendship for me, and as I have communicated to you your husband's infamous conduct towards me on the present

occasion, you stipulate for a solemn agreement on his part to abstain from all molestation towards me in future."

"Ah! I understand," said Mrs. Malpas, now amazingly relishing the scheme which Lady Sackville had propounded. "The idea is excellent, and may be carried out to complete success."

"I felt persuaded you would embark in this friendly enterprise with me," said Lady Sackville. "I have already provided myself with the sum of five thousand pounds, which I will place in your hands this evening, and which you can show to the Colonel not only as a proof of the tale you will tell him, but also as an inducement for him to yield to your views."

After some further discussion upon the details of the scheme, the two ladies separated until the evening—Mrs. Malpas returning to Butcher-hall Lane to devise some excuse for a night's absence from her parents' home, while Lady Sackville remained in the drawing-room pondering upon all that had just taken place.

"In about half-an-hour her husband entered that apartment; and accosting her with mingled suspense and hesitation, he said, "Well, Venetia—have you been enabled to comply with my request?"

"I have," she answered: then drawing forth her purse, she produced the Bank-notes which she had deposited there and handed them to her husband,—at the same time observing with one of her most enchanting smiles, "I am afraid you are getting rather extravagant, Horace. I hope that Captain Tash does not lead you into gambling or betting——"

"Venetia," interrupted Lord Sackville, somewhat haughtily, "if you mean to accompany your present with a lecture, pray take it back. I thought our agreement was that we should each pursue our own career with mutual independence, so long as we observed all the outward decencies of life and sustained proper appearances as on the part of man and wife."

"Such was our agreement," observed Venetia, with a still more winning smile; "and let it be adhered to. If I have given you offence or wounded your feelings, I am truly sorry. I was only fearful that as Tash is now frequently with you, and as he is not over particular in his own pursuits——"

"Come, we will have no angry words nor remonstrances of any kind," said Horace: and thrusting the Bank-notes into his pocket, he embraced his wife—renewed his thanks for the pecuniary succour she had afforded him—and then quitted the room.

CHAPTER CXL.

THE KEY UNDER THE MAT.

It was about half-past ten o'clock in the evening; and if we look into the dining-room belonging to the Sackvilles' suite of apartments at Carlton House, we shall find Lord Sackville himself, the Prince Regent, and Captain Tash seated at the table drinking caraçoa-punch and playing cards for heavy stakes.

A domestic entered and handed Horace a note, with the whispered intimation that immediate attention was requested thereto. Lord Sackville, instantaneously recognising the hand-writing, begged his guests to excuse him while he perused the billet; and when his eyes had hastily scanned it over, he rose from his chair, exclaiming, "Your Royal Highness must excuse me—and you also, Captain: but very particular business——"

"No doubt of it," said the Prince, laughing: "it is a lady's hand-writing, I'll be bound. Besides, any one could tell that much by the way the elegant little missive was folded——"

"Yes—and I can scent the fragrance of it from here," said Tash: "'tis perfumed with otto of roses."

"Be off with you, Horace," said the Prince, still laughing. "Tash and I will continue the game together: for it seems that I have a run of luck this evening, since I have pocketed a cool thousand of your money, Horace."

"Another time you will give me my revenge, sir," replied Sackville: then, having intimated that it was very probable he should not return until a late hour, he quitted the room.

"Sackville has an intrigue on hand," observed the Prince, as the door closed behind his youthful Lord Steward: "have you any idea who the fair one is?"

"Not in the least, sir," responded Tash. "He keeps it very close to himself; and I am not the man to pry into a friend's secrets. Daggers and bayonets! no—not I, for the world!"

"You are no doubt an excellent fellow," said the Prince, laughing. "Come, fill the tumblers. This punch is superfine."

The Captain did as he was desired; and having replenished the two glasses, he at once emptied his own, saying, "Well I do think that this is an excellent brew. So here goes another just to drink the health of Sackville's fair one, whoever she may be. And by the bye," continued the Captain, again replenishing his glass, "I must drink success to the amour, hoping that if there be a husband in the case he is not a jealous one."

"Ah! talking of women and gallantry," said the Prince, "who was that lady that visited Lady Sackville this afternoon, and whom you bowed to as she passed through the hall to go out? You were coming in at the moment if you remember; and I was passing out of the Council-Chamber——"

"I recollect it," exclaimed Tash. "It was Mrs. Malpas."

"What—that scoundrel Colonel's wife?" said the Prince.

"The very same," responded the Captain. "I knew her before she was Mrs. Malpas. In fact, between your Royal Highness, myself, and the post, I made love to her——"

"But what on earth can she have to do with Lady Sackville?" exclaimed the Prince.

"Perhaps come to ask forgiveness for her husband, or something of the kind," said Tash. "She is such a soft, spoony, sentimental creature——"

"But she has a marvellous fine figure though," said the Prince; "and such a dainty foot and ankle! Upon my word, as she tripped through the hall, it quite made me feel in a state of excitement to observe those beautifully rounded ankles. Her bust, too, struck me as being very fine."

"There is no doubt, sir, she is a devilish nice

woman," observed Tash. "So here's her health:" —and he again filled and emptied his glass, just as if it were a water-drinking instead of a punch-imbibing process.

"Her teeth, too, seemed to be very good," continued the Prince. "I noticed her particularly as she turned with a half-smile to acknowledge your bow——"

"Her teeth are magnificent," answered the Captain. "I am very fond of fine teeth—so I am of this punch:"—and he refilled his glass. "But do you not intend, sir, to go on with the cards?"

"Not just for the moment," answered the Prince: "let us talk of this Mrs. Malpas. She has somewhat struck my fancy: and if I thought——"

"I am well acquainted with Mrs. Malpas," said the Captain, now penetrating the Prince's views with regard to that lady; "and if I can do anything—your Royal Highness knows what I mean——"

"But what sort of a reputation does she bear?" asked the Prince, catching the look of intelligence which the Captain fixed upon him; "is she quite correct—quite modest—very particular—and so forth?"

"I believe so—I never heard anything to the contrary," rejoined the gallant officer. "In fact I am almost certain that she is a virtuous woman. But Lord bless you, sir!" he continued; "if your Royal Highness only wishes to possess Mrs. Malpas, it could be easily managed; for she is such a soft easy kind of a creature that the bare idea of the honour which the Prince Regent would be doing her, would overpower her at once and make her fall into your arms. But I wonder where Sackville has put his cigars."

"Ah! let us have a cigar," said the Prince; "and we will discuss this matter about Mrs. Malpas."

The Captain rose from his seat and searched in the side-board drawers, on the mantel, and every place he could think of for Sackville's cigar-case: but it was not to be found.

"If you don't mind the trouble of going to my dressing-room," said the Prince,—"you know where it is?—you will find some splendid cigars upon the mantel. Or you can ring and send to fetch them."

"No—I will go myself, sir," replied Tash: and thus speaking he issued forth from the dining-room.

It was now close upon eleven o'clock; and as the Captain was proceeding along the passage to seek the Prince's private apartments, he suddenly caught sight of Mrs. Malpas and Lady Sackville as they emerged together from the latter's boudoir. On observing the gallant officer advancing, the two ladies retreated into the room, doubtless fancying that they were far enough off for Mrs. Malpas to have escaped recognition: and thus hastily re-entering the boudoir, they closed the door.

Captain Tash was struck by this circumstance. What could Mrs. Malpas be possibly doing in Carlton House?—how was it that she had thus managed to place herself on such evident terms of intimacy with Venetia as to visit her twice in the same day? Not only was the Captain's curiosity piqued, but he was likewise anxious to watch the motions of Mrs. Malpas in consequence of the discourse which he had held with the Prince concerning her a few minutes back. He felt convinced that she was not now at the palace on a mere friendly visit to Lady Sackville, but that something savouring of intrigue or manœuvring was going on—an opinion which seemed to be confirmed by the sudden withdrawal of the ladies on beholding him approach along the passage.

Casting his eyes hastily up and down the corridor, Captain Tash could see no place where to conceal himself; and for a few instants he stood irresolute how to act. But immediately behind where he had halted was a door that stood ajar; and without farther hesitation, but at all risks, he stepped back—pushed open the door—and entered the place into which it led. Obscurity enveloped it; but from the beam of light which penetrated at the moment that he opened the door, he fancied that he caught the outlines of a couch and drapery, thus inducing the belief that it was a bedroom.

Here, with the door kept ajar—that is to say, open to about the extent of an inch—the Captain ensconced himself, and listened with breathless attention. Two or three minutes passed—and all was still in the corridor. The Captain now began to recollect that he had quitted the Prince for the purpose of procuring cigars from his Royal Highness's dressing-room; and he was just thinking that he had better perform that errand and return to his royal companion, when he heard a door open gently higher up the passage. Motionless as a statue, and breathless as one too, did the Captain remain at his post; and in a few moments he heard the rustling of female dresses and the gentle tread of light feet approaching from the direction where the door had opened. Almost immediately afterwards he caught the soft murmur of voices; and the next moment the two ladies—for he could now distinguish through the keyhole that there *were* two figures—stopped at the door of the room immediately opposite the one where he was stationed.

"This is the chamber, my dear friend," said a voice, which Captain Tash instantaneously discovered to be Venetia's: then, as she threw the opposite door open, she said, "Lights are burning and everything is prepared."

The two ladies then entered the chamber; and Captain Tash, still peeping through the keyhole of his own door, caught a glimpse of the countenance of Mrs. Malpas as she passed into that room, the door of which was immediately closed. For upwards of five minutes all was then still in the passage again.

Still Captain Tash remained at his post. What could this mean? Was Mrs. Malpas going to pass the night at Carlton House? If so, there would have been nothing very extraordinary in such a circumstance, supposing that she was on very intimate terms with Venetia and that no mystery was observed. But the Captain, who was a thorough man of the world, knew full well that Mrs. Malpas was *not* the kind of woman that the intellectual Venetia would choose as a bosom-friend; and he therefore argued that her ladyship was making use of the Colonel's wife for some purpose or another. Besides, there *was* evidently a certain degree of mystery in the manner in which Mrs. Malpas had been conducted to that room: and thus everything seemed to corroborate the Captain's first suspicion, that something of a designing and covert nature was going on.

Such were the reflections that passed through

his mind, as he still kept his post; and at the expiration of five minutes he heard female footsteps again coming down the passage. By aid of the convenient key-hole, the Captain presently recognised Jessica, Venetia's maid: and by the stealthy manner in which this confidential abigail was treading the passage, as also from the importance expressed in her looks, Captain Tash felt more than ever assured that some strange manœuvring was really in progress and that Jessica had her part to perform in it.

Halting at the opposite chamber, Jessica gave a low knock—and Venetia immediately opened the door.

"Can I be of any assistance, my lady?" asked the abigail, in a voice which though subdued was nevertheless just loud enough for Captain Tash's ears, sharpened as they were by his curiosity, to catch what she said.

"No—I have assisted Mrs. Malpas to undress," responded Venetia, also in a low tone, but which was nevertheless audible to the eaves-dropping Captain.

"Then shall I now go?" asked Jessica, with a significant look.

"Yes, it is eleven o'clock," said Lady Sackville: and closing the door again, she disappeared from the Captain's view.

Jessica then tripped lightly along the passage; and in another minute or two Venetia came forth from the room opposite. But as she still held the door open in her hand, she looked back and said in an encouraging tone, "Good night, my dear friend—and may the issue be as we anticipate."

She then came forward—closed the door—locked it—and placed the key under the fringed mat which was set against the threshold. Having done this, Venetia retraced her way along the passage; and in a few moments the sound of a door closing reached the ears of Captain Tash.

Feeling assured that she had entered some room—most probably her boudoir, which the Captain knew to be in that passage—he issued forth from his place of concealment and hurried back to the apartment where he had left the Prince Regent.

"Well, what became of you?" demanded his Royal Highness. "You have been absent full twenty minutes, and I was just going to ring the bell and order a servant to look after you."

"Do not talk, sir, for heaven's sake!" said Tash, evidently labouring under some strange kind of excitement. "Let *me* speak—there is not a moment to spare! The strangest adventure in all the world——"

"Well, what in the name of patience is it?" demanded the Prince.

"Mrs. Malpas is here—beneath this roof!" answered Tash. "She is going to pass the night here—she is at this moment alone in her bedroom—a bedroom belonging to the Sackvilles' suite of apartments—and Lady Sackville herself conducted her thither! I saw it all—I hid myself and listened——"

"Are you drunk or mad?" exclaimed the Prince, surveying Tash in amazement.

"Neither," was the prompt reply; "and if any one but your Royal Highness had asked me such a question, in another moment I would have knocked his head off his shoulders. But come—will you avail yourself of this opportunity? It is a golden one! Daggers and wounds! don't hesitate, sir—I conjure you!"

"But is it all true?" exclaimed the Prince, now starting from his seat; and being somewhat inflamed with the punch which he had been drinking, his imagination instantaneously depicted to itself the pleasures of a new conquest.

"Will your Royal Highness be guided by me?" demanded Tash impatiently. "Come—and if in a few minutes you are not clasped in the arms of that very fair one whom you coveted ere now, then may I be denounced as a liar, and may a stigma settle for ever on the name of Rodando Tash!"

Not another moment did the Prince hesitate. His imagination, already reveling in the sensuous joys which his prurient fancy conjured up, urged him on and stifled all scruples. As for what Venetia might say—or whether she would ever discover the proceeding at all—he paused not to reflect: his passions, now strongly aroused, were dominant for the time being.

Issuing forth from the apartment, the Prince Regent and Captain Tash proceeded along the passage together; and on reaching the chamber to which Mrs. Malpas had been introduced, the gallant officer stooped down and drew forth the key from beneath the velvet mat. This proceeding somewhat surprised the Prince; for it naturally struck him as strange that the key should be there. But the Captain placed his finger upon his lip, and his Royal Highness said not a word. The next moment the key was introduced into the lock by the hand of the gallant officer—the door was opened—and the Prince Regent without another instant's hesitation stepped in.

Captain Tash then closed the door—locked it—put the key into his pocket—and once more concealed himself in the room opposite: for he felt convinced that the key had been placed beneath the mat by Venetia to aid the intrigue which was going on; and he was resolved to wait and see the issue thereof, if possible.

Here we must leave the gallant officer and follow the Prince Regent into the chamber which had been assigned by Lady Sackville to Mrs. Malpas.

CHAPTER CXLI.

THE ROYAL INTRUDER.

The couch in the chamber was so situated, with the drapery drawn around it, that as the Prince entered he could not immediately perceive the lady who occupied it. Wax-candles were burning upon the table; and gently drawing back the curtain, his Royal Highness cast a hurried and anxious look upon Mrs. Malpas. We say *anxious*, because he was fearful at the moment that on recognizing him she might scream forth.

But the lady had her eyes fast closed, and indeed was pretending to be asleep. By the advice of Venetia she had placed herself in a manner which, with all the appearance of an unstudied abandonment, had the effect of displaying her charms to the most voluptuous advantage. As a matter of course she fancied that it was her husband who had just entered; and as Malpas was to be introduced there under the impression that it was

the lovely Venetia whom he would find in readiness to receive him, it was as a matter of calculation that Mrs. Malpas had disposed herself in the most provoking attitude, so as to enthral those desires which the idea of possessing Venetia would no doubt excite in the Colonel's breast. She feigned to be asleep too, in order that her husband (as she supposed him to be) might have leisure to collect his thoughts and see the necessity of putting the best possible face on the disappointment thus in store for him; and likewise that he might have an opportunity of contemplating those charms which his wife, with a very pardonable vanity, flattered herself could not be altogether without an effect upon him after so long a separation.

But the Prince, not knowing anything of all these matters—neither why Mrs. Malpas was there at all, nor whom she expected—supposed her to be really sleeping; and with a quick glance swept over the couch, did he observe all that was sensuously exciting and voluptuously provocative in the abandonment of her person as she had thus disposed herself. One white and well-rounded arm was curved above her head: her dark-brown hair flowed negligently over the pillow—her shoulders and bust were uncovered—and her other arm lay upon the coverlid, the folds and plaits of which developed the symmetry of the lower limbs, thus delineating the fine modelling of their proportions. The flush of excitement was upon the lady's cheeks; and the moist lips, which she held apart the better to feign slumber, revealed two rows of pearly teeth.

Such was the delicious spectacle which greeted the Prince's eyes as he slowly drew aside the curtains. But not for many moments did he suffer his looks to linger on the lady whom he believed to be sleeping soundly. His desires were worked up to the highest pitch: the blood seemed to boil in his veins. It was not an intoxication, but a delirium of pleasure that seized upon him—for these were ever the sensations which the royal voluptuary experienced when a new conquest seemed about to crown his triumphs in the wars of love. Burning, therefore, with impatience to profit by the present golden opportunity, and fearful that the lady might awake and scream out in the sudden fright of beholding a man in her room, he at once advanced on tiptoe up to the table and snuffed out the candles. This proceeding was accomplished so suddenly, that although Mrs. Malpas opened her eyes at the first click of the snuffers, yet the second candle was extinguished ere she had time to observe that the individual was not her husband. She just caught sight of the form as it stood by the table; but almost at the same moment the room was enveloped in darkness, so that she perceived not the definite outline of that male shape.

"Percy," she now said in a low and tremulous tone, as she pretended to awaken up, "we thus meet again! But little, little did you expect to behold me here," she continued in accents of mild and gentle reproach. "Ah! were you not astonished when your eyes fell upon the occupant of this couch, and instead of the magnificent form of Lady Sackville you beheld *me*—your wife—her whom you have neglected and whom you have perhaps fancied to be your enemy! But wherefore did you extinguish those lights so suddenly? Is it that I am loathsome and hateful to you—that you cannot bear to look upon me? or is it that you yourself feel remorse for the past and shame for the present, and dare not meet my gaze? If it be so—and sincerely, most sincerely do I hope it is—then is there reason to expect that all the best feelings of your nature are not extinguished within you. But wherefore do you not answer me? Ah! you are astounded at this unexpected meeting with me?—or perhaps you are listening in silent disgust and scorn at what you may haply deem a vulgar curtain lecture? But suppose that I have good news for you?—suppose that I could tell you of wealth and prospects of happiness? Would you not listen to me with feelings of interest *then?*"

The reader can perhaps imagine far better than we can describe the sudden stupefaction which seized upon the Prince when Mrs. Malpas first began to speak—indeed as the very opening word she uttered fell upon his ears. That word was a name—the name of *Percy*—her husband's christian name! The truth flashed to the mind of the Prince in a moment: it was her husband whom she was expecting there! That stupefaction became a positive consternation as she went on speaking. He saw that she fancied she was addressing herself to her husband, whom she was disposed to forgive for his past offences towards her; and he felt that this was scarcely the mood in which a woman could bear to be told that it was *not* the husband whom she expected, but an interloper who had sought her presence by stratagem and was now listening to her in the dark.

But still something must be done. For a moment the Prince thought of beating a quick retreat: but then he recollected that he had heard Tash lock the door behind him; and deep was the imprecation which in the depth of his soul the royal voluptuary vented on the head of the officious Captain who had brought him into this strange dilemma.

Retreat was therefore impossible: and yet again recurred the thought that something *must* be done. The lady was still going on talking—still delivering herself of those expressions which we have just now recorded. The Prince grew more and more bewildered. She had asked why the candles were extinguished. What on earth could he say? She then asked him why he did not speak to her. Again, what in the name of goodness was he to say? And yet something *must* be done. The position was growing fearfully critical. If he revealed himself, would she alarm the whole palace with her cries? Suddenly the Prince Regent recollected what Tash had told him relative to her being of a disposition that would sink overwhelmed beneath the *honour* of the royal favour: and inspired by the cheering hope, the Prince resolved to do his best in bringing the present dilemma to a tranquil and peaceful issue. Advancing therefore to the couch, he took her hand and pressed it to his lips—but without uttering a word: and this was done at the instant she reached that part where her speech broke off as above indicated.

"Ah! I am glad," she continued, "that you are not filled with anger and vexation at the disappointment you have experienced. At all events let me beseech you to sit down by the side of the couch, and talk seriously and deliberately with me——By

the bye, you have shaved off your moustache," she observed, forgetting for the moment that she ought to be playing a grave and sentimental part: but the natural frivolity of her character would thus break out in spite of herself—in spite also of the tutorings she had received from Lady Sackville. "And let me tell you that your hand is not quite so smooth as it used to be—it is somewhat wrinkled——Heavens! what a dissipated life you must have been leading to have got your hand so wrinkled during the short space of a few months. Let me see: it was in October last year when we separated, and this is the end of April——But why have you withdrawn your hand?"

The Prince, thinking that the moment was not quite come yet for revealing himself, patted her cheek three or four times with the palm of the hand which he had just withdrawn from the grasp of her own fair fingers: and then feeling for the chair at the side of the couch, he sate down.

"Now, my dear Percy," resumed the lady, "I have a proposal to make to you, which you may accept if you will—and I do not think you will refuse it. Suppose that no affection subsists between us, yet for decency's sake should we live together *like* man and wife, if not *as* man and wife. But you will ask me about our means. Now let me tell you that I am better off than you fancy. I have got five thousand pounds which my father has given me; and I have brought them hither with me to show you, and thus convince you that I am telling the truth. Only you have put out the lights—and I cannot conceive why——"

By this time the Prince had collected his scattered and bewildered ideas in such a way that his passions had also flamed up once more. His imagination pictured to itself this lady as he had seen her, when first entering the room, in that voluptuous abandonment of her person which had excited his desires to almost a frenzied degree; and through the deep darkness of the chamber did he now behold her with his mental vision. And he was close by her—he was seated against the couch on which she lay. If he stretched out his hand it would encounter a warm plump arm or a heaving bosom: if he leant forward he would inhale the fragrance of her breath; and a perfume of sensuousness seemed to float around him, intoxicating his brain with its influence.

He again took her hand—he pressed it to his lips: then he kissed her cheeks——But Ah! a sudden and a half-stifled cry escapes her lips as she feels something cold touch her naked breast with a sensation as if it were a weapon about to inflict death from a murderous hand! It is the star which the Prince had worn in the afternoon when holding a Privy Council, and which he had kept upon his coat. The lady's fingers, instinctively seeking for the object that sent a thrill through her bosom, felt the star—and a terrible suspicion instantaneously flashed to her mind.

"Good God! who is it?" she exclaimed, but in a half-stifled hysterical voice, as she convulsively pushed the Prince away from her.

"Fear not, dear lady—I am the Prince!" was the quick, we might almost say the galvanic response: for his Royal Highness felt that this was the crisis of the adventure.

"The Prince!" repeated Mrs. Malpas, in a sort of suffocating tone.

"Yes—the Prince—who loves—who adores you!" resumed the royal voluptuary with electric haste, as he once more seized her hand and pressed it to his heart. "Yes—dearest lady, I am one who can appreciate your charms—who will love and cherish you—treat you with kindness—raise you to distinction—place you upon a pedestal amidst the beauties of rank and fashion—in a word, do everything that may convince you of the depth and the sincerity of his passion. Tell me then—tell me, is not the love of your Prince—the love of him who will one day be your Sovereign—better than the society of a worthless unprincipled fellow like your husband?"

"Ah! my husband," ejaculated the lady, in sudden alarm. "Does he know that you are here?"

"No—heaven forbid that I should compromise you!" exclaimed the Prince.

"But he will come then!—every moment he may come!" said the lady, in accents convulsed with dread. "Oh! what am I to do? what am I to do?"

"Summon your fortitude to your aid," hastily responded the Prince, now snatching a thousand little liberties as he caught the terrified lady in his arms and strained her to his breast. "Should Malpas indeed come, answer him at the door—tell him you have thought better of it and that you will not receive him——"

"But he fancies that it is Lady Sackville whom he is coming here to meet," said Mrs. Malpas, not reflecting whether there were any harm in making this statement. "Your Royal Highness must understand," she continued hurriedly, "that my wicked husband wished to coerce her ladyship—and her ladyship placed me here to receive him in her stead."

"So I understood from the opening observations which you made when I first entered the room," said the Prince. "But hush!—some one approaches!"

The Prince and Mrs. Malpas now held their breath to listen; and they distinctly heard footsteps pause suddenly just outside the door. Then there was a rustling of a gown, accompanied by a groping about underneath the mat at the threshold,—which sounds indicated clearly enough that some one was looking for the key which had ere now been concealed there. These sounds were followed by low whispers: the door was tried next—but as it remained immoveable, a gentle tap was given.

Then in the lowest possible accent did the Prince whisper certain rapid instructions to Mrs. Malpas; and issuing from the couch she felt her way through the darkness to the door, and said in a low tone, "Who is there?"

"'Tis I—with the Colonel," responded the voice of Jessica on the outside of the door.

"Bid the Colonel depart as he came. I have changed my mind—I will have nothing to do with him," replied Mrs. Malpas, speaking through the keyhole, and in accents so low that it was impossible for the Colonel, who was with Jessica, to recognise the voice of his wife.

Immediately after she had given utterance to these words, Mrs. Malpas turned away from the door and was caught in the arms of the Prince, who strained her to his breast: but he felt that she was trembling all over, while her heart was beating

quickly and her bosom was palpitating violently with the excitement of the present scene.

"Now let them all think what they like and do what they like," murmured the Prince in the lady's ear, as he bore her back to the couch.

But just at this moment a strange noise, resembling a sudden rush and a short scuffle in the passage, just outside the door, reached the ears of his Royal Highness and Mrs. Malpas. They listened with suspended breath; a door closed opposite—and then all was still once more.

"What could that be?" asked Mrs. Malpas, in a suffocating tone, and again trembling with the excitement of alarm and suspense.

"Nothing that concerns us," responded the Prince, straining her with still more frantic violence in his arms; as if by the very power of his caresses he sought to lull the trembling of her form and the fluttering of her heart.

But he could not help thinking at the moment that the noise in the passage which had just startled them, was some freak or achievement on the part of his coadjutor in this night's adventure, the redoubtable Captain Tash!

CHAPTER CXLII.

THE FEMALE GARB.

In consequence of the Colonel's watch having stopped, he was about twenty minutes later than the hour of appointment at the private door of the palace: and Jessica therefore had to wait his arrival. When he made his appearance, she chided him for this delay: but he at once explained the cause, expressing his deep sorrow for the circumstance.

The abigail led him up into the passage communicating with the Sackvilles' suite of apart-

ments; and on reaching the door of the chamber where, as we have already seen, Mrs. Malpas and the Prince were together, Jessica stooped down and felt for the key. But it was not there—and for a moment she thought that perhaps Lady Sackville might have either forgotten to place it under the mat, or on a second thought had purposely left it inside. Malpas inquired in a low whisper wherefore Jessica seemed bewildered; and she hurriedly explained that she was searching for the key of the apartment. This was the whispering that the Prince and Mrs. Malpas had overheard, as already described.

Jessica now tried the handle: but, as we have also stated, the door moved not. Then she tapped gently; and when answered she intimated in a low voice that Colonel Malpas was with her—whereupon, to her own amazement and to the mingled rage and disappointment of the Colonel himself, a voice from inside and which *he* supposed to be Venetia's, announced a change of mind and ordered Malpas to depart!

Jessica actually staggered back from the door; and turning her eyes upon the Colonel, she saw that he was pale with rage and quivering from head to foot.

"Stop," she said: "there is some mistake—I must go and see! Remain here for a single moment: and if you meet anybody, say you have come to see Lord Sackville—or your old butler Plumpstead—or any body else, so long as you invent some excuse."

Then having delivered these instructions with nervous haste, Jessica tripped away, hurrying along the passage to Venetia's boudoir, which she immediately entered.

But scarcely had the door of that sanctuary closed behind the lady's-maid, when the Colonel, who was standing irresolute and bewildered where she had left him, was suddenly seized upon by two powerful arms; and the ejaculation of alarm which rose to his lips was stifled by a hand being placed on his mouth. Glancing around at the individual who had thus surreptitiously assailed and mastered him, he recognised the moustached and whiskered countenance of the formidable Captain Tash!

For a moment the Colonel struggled desperately to extricate himself: but the Captain lifting him in his arms, and still maintaining one hand forcibly held over his mouth, carried him into the room whence he had thus so suddenly emerged. There, as the Captain immediately closed the door behind him, they were enveloped in utter darkness: but as the Colonel felt himself released from the powerful gripe of his assailant, he heard that formidable individual's voice breathe a terrible threat in his ears.

"If you dare cry out, or move without my leave," said the Captain, "I will cut you into mince-meat!"

Malpas was overwhelmed with terror. What could all this mean? Had he been inveigled into a trap to be ill-treated—perhaps murdered? Every circumstance seemed to confirm his belief that treachery was intended him. That seeming inability of the lady's-maid to find the key of the room opposite—the announcement from within that room and which he of course believed to have been made by Venetia—the abrupt manner in which Jessica had left him—the sudden assault made on him by Tash—and now this forcible carrying him off into a place where a pitchy darkness prevailed, together with a knowledge of the desperate character of the man himself and the conviction that there was a deep personal animosity existing on that individual's part against him,—all these circumstances were but too well calculated to fill even a braver man than Malpas with suspicions of treachery.

"For heaven's sake do not hurt me," he said, so soon as he could recover the power of speech; "and I will do whatever you order me!"

"You sneaking, grovelling, despicable coward," exclaimed Tash, who entertained the most cordial hatred for the Colonel: "what a pretty figure you are doubtless cutting now, if I had but a light to see you!"

"Oh! do get a light, Captain Tash!" implored Malpas, to whom the darkness was fraught with indescribable terrors: for he every instant fancied that some assassin-blow would be dealt him. "I know that it serves me very right, what you are doing or what you intend to do: but, for heaven's sake! forgive me, and I swear by everything sacred that I will molest Lady Sackville no more!"

"Ah! you will swear that—will you?" said the Captain, who now began to have a dim, though still *very* dim, idea of the truth relative to this night's adventure: at all events it struck him that there was plot and counterplot on the part of Malpas and Venetia respectively; and of course the Captain, for more reasons than one, was well disposed to take the part of Lady Sackville. "And so you swear," he accordingly said, "that you will never molest her ladyship again?"

"Yes—I swear, I swear most solemnly," said the Colonel, still in accents indicative of the profoundest alarm. "Therefore I beseech you to spare me—I implore you not to do me a mischief—nor to suffer one to be done me——"

"Well, it was my intention," observed Captain Tash, delighted to have the opportunity of torturing the wretched coward, "to cut your throat from ear to ear——."

"O horror!" groaned the Colonel: and the Captain heard him fall upon his knees. "For God's sake, don't—don't!"—and his teeth chattered audibly.

"But if I spare you," said Tash; "if I lay aside this great butcher's knife that I have just now got in my hand——"

"My God! my God!" moaned the wretched Colonel, who felt that his hair was standing on end, while from head to foot the cold perspiration broke out all over him.

"And devilish sharp it is too," added Tash, inwardly chuckling at this cruel revenge he was inflicting upon his enemy.

"No, no—you will not—you cannot perpetrate this atrocity! Heavens! could Lady Sackville have prompted you to do it?" exclaimed the miserable man.

"How dare you, then, molest her?" demanded Tash. "Gibbets and daggers! thunder and wounds! didn't you have enough of it that night when I thrashed you in your own hall?"

"For heaven's sake, name your conditions and let me go!" said the Colonel, in a voice of anguished

entreaty. "What can I do? what guarantee can I offer you? what security can I give that I will fulfil your terms?"

"Ah! that's the difficulty," observed Tash. "If I let you go now, you will only renew your tricks again another time——But Ah! here is a tinder-box," he suddenly exclaimed, "and we will throw a light upon the matter!"

Thus speaking, the gallant officer by the aid of the flint and steel soon lighted a candle which was standing on the mantel, where his hand had accidentally come in contact with the materials for thus procuring that light: and as his eyes now swept around, he perceived as he had already suspected, that the scene of the present episode was a bed-chamber. But it was a small one, and by no means handsomely though still very neatly furnished,—while several articles of feminine apparel, such as cotton-gowns, caps, and so forth, showed that it was a chamber belonging to some female dependant—most likely one of Lady Sackville's maids. On the floor the Colonel was still kneeling—his countenance ghastly pale, his lips ashy white and quivering, his hands joined, and his whole appearance denoting the most excruciating terror. But as the light shone upon the scene, and the Colonel observed that the place into which he had been borne was only a bed-chamber and had not the slightest appearance of a human slaughter-house,—and moreover, as Captain Tash did not appear to be brandishing the sharp butcher's knife whereof he had spoken,—the Colonel recovered somewhat of his presence of mind; and slowly rising from his knees, he said, "I did not think that you would carry your dreadful threats into execution after all."

"Don't be too sure!" exclaimed the Captain, fixing upon him his fiercest look; then putting his hand underneath his coat-tails, he said, "It was through merciful considerations that I put away the knife before I lit the candle: but if you think that I am not capable of inflicting a ghastly punishment upon you, then, by all the cannons and bayonets! I will very soon show you the contrary:"—and he made a movement as if about to draw forth the formidable knife from his coat-pocket.

"No, no!" ejaculated the Colonel: "spare me, spare me! Tell me what you require, and I will at once accede to your demands."

Suddenly the thought struck Captain Tash that it would be gratifying his revenge and ministering to his facetious sense of amusement at the same time, if he were to put a crowning ignominy upon the grovelling coward whom he so loathed and detested. No sooner did the idea thus strike him, than he resolved to carry it into execution; and assuming his most ferocious aspect, he exclaimed, "There is but one condition on which I will spare you!"

"Name it, name it!" eagerly cried the Colonel.

"That you put on this gown and this cap," said Tash, pointing to the articles of female apparel which he thus specified; "and that you go forth from the palace in this garb."

"Good heavens! you cannot be serious?" said the Colonel, in dismay.

"Ten thousand thunders!" exclaimed the Captain; "I never was more serious in my life. Come—be quick, or by heaven! the butcher's knife——"

"Oh! don't, don't," groaned the Colonel, a cold tremor passing visibly over him.

"Then be quick, I say," said the Captain, again thrusting his hand in a menacing manner beneath his coat-tails to grasp the visionary butcher's knife.

"Yes, yes," said Malpas, in such a flutter of cowardly excitement that he scarcely knew what he was doing.

"Now, then, let me be your handmaid," said Tash: and stripping off the Colonel's coat and waistcoat, he made him put on the gown which was hanging to the wall, and also a cap with gay ribbons that lay upon a chest of drawers. "And now go forth, you miserable coward!" exclaimed Tash, laughing tauntingly as he opened the door and pushed out the unhappy Colonel into the passage.

But here we must pause for a few minutes, in order to return to Jessica after she left Malpas and went to seek her mistress in the boudoir. There she found Venetia seated alone, very far from suspecting the many incidents and episodes that were growing out of the main adventure which she had planned for this memorable night.

On beholding her abigail enter, Venetia turned indolently round upon the sofa where she was more reclining than sitting, and said, "Well, I suppose it is all right?"

"Heavens! no, my lady," was the startling response.

"Ah! what then is the matter?" demanded Venetia, now springing from the sofa as she observed the singular expression of the faithful Jessica's looks.

"I cannot comprehend it," was the abigail's quick response. "The key is gone—the door is still locked—and Mrs. Malpas, from inside the room, declares she has changed her mind."

"What!" cried Venetia in dismay: "is it possible?"

"Yes—and she says that the Colonel may go whence he came," added Jessica.

"But you must be dreaming—you must have gone to the wrong room."

"Impossible, my lady: 'tis the spare bedroom."

"Yes—but you must have misunderstood Mrs. Malpas, then," said Venetia, catching at any hypothesis to account for the extraordinary tale she had just heard from Jessica's lips.

"I can assure your ladyship that it is as I say," rejoined the maid.

"And the Colonel—where is he?" demanded Venetia quickly.

"I have left him standing in the passage while I came to ask your instructions. What is to be done?"

"I know not—I am bewildered," responded Venetia. "But at all events the Colonel must not be left there. Go and get him away—induce him to depart——invent some excuse—say anything—tell him to come and see me to-morrow——Haste, haste, Jessica!—he must not be allowed to loiter there!"

The abigail issued from the boudoir, closing the door behind her. But the moment she thus emerged into the passage she saw that it was empty. No one was there. She hesitated what to do; and she was about to return into the boudoir and report this new circumstance to Venetia, when it struck her that the Colonel might have been afraid to tarry in the passage any longer and had sought his way back to the private door. But as Jessica had locked that door and kept the key in her possession when she gave him admittance ere now, she at once felt the necessity of hastening thither to afford him egress.

But on arriving at the private door she saw no one: and again pausing for a few moments, she reflected what was to be done now. Had he lost his way somewhere in the palace? This appeared most probable; and Jessica went wandering through every passage and corridor to satisfy herself on the point. Thus did she lose nearly twenty minutes, during which the scene between the Colonel and Captain Tash was taking place.

Let us now return to Venetia. When left alone in the boudoir by Jessica, she sat down again upon the sofa to reflect on the singular behaviour of Mrs. Malpas. When Venetia parted from that lady it was with the hope, as cordial as it seemed mutual, that the issue of the adventure would be satisfactory; and indeed all Lady Sackville's previous tutorings had been received with the best possible grace by Mrs. Malpas. How, then, could she have so suddenly changed her mind?—was she a woman as vacillating as she was frivolous, as variable as she was weak-minded? To no other conclusion could Venetia come. But the key which had been placed under the mat—how had it disappeared? Even supposing that Mrs. Malpas *had* thought better of the matter and *had* resolved at the last moment not to play the part which she had undertaken, still she could not have possessed herself of the key to secure the door against the possibility of intrusion. She had been locked *inside* the room, and the key had been placed under the mat *outside*: it was therefore physically impossible she could have possessed herself of it. Then what had become of that key?

Venetia was utterly bewildered. She knew not what to think: and yet a vague and feebly glimmering suspicion was dawning in her mind, that something had taken place beyond the scope of her present conjecture. Indeed she could not help thinking that if anybody of the male sex had found the key, had penetrated into the chamber, and had made himself agreeable to Mrs. Malpas, the mystery would be cleared up at once. The reader is already aware that Lady Sackville was quick-witted, sharp, and intelligent beyond even the ordinary shrewdness of her sex; and thus was it that she looked further than her first conjectures for a solution of the occurrence which had so much bewildered her.

Having once experienced the glimmering of suspicion, Venetia was not long in thinking of the means which would either confirm or refute it. Issuing from the boudoir, she crept stealthily along the passage, and was about to listen at Mrs. Malpas's door, when the sounds of male voices, apparently in altercation and coming from the room opposite, somewhat alarmed her. These voices were in reality the Colonel's and Captain's: but as the door was shut, Venetia recognised them not. Wondering what was the meaning of that apparent quarrelling, and who the men could be—for it was her housemaid's apartment whence the voices issued—Venetia hurried back to her boudoir; for she did not choose to run the risk of being seen loitering about in the passage.

But now, why did not Jessica return?—where was she?—what was she doing?—what could be detaining her? Twenty minutes had elapsed—and still she returned not. Lady Sackville grew nervous and impatient. Those male voices in her housemaid's room had filled her with fresh misgivings; and she almost regretted that she had not entered to ascertain who the individuals were. Her uneasiness became intolerable; and she resolved to sally forth again in search of Jessica. But just at the moment when she opened the boudoir door a second time, she beheld what she took to be a female figure issue from her housemaid's room; and instantaneously recognizing that servant's cap and cotton dress, Venetia called her in a peremptory manner by name. She then turned hurriedly back into the boudoir: for her excitement was increased at the idea that the housemaid herself had been present in the room with the men, whoever they were, that had been speaking in such angry tones.

Here we must pause for a moment to observe that the housemaid was a very tall, gawky young woman; and thus was it that, in the excitement and confusion of her ideas, Venetia did not notice at the instant that the figure which emerged so suddenly from the room farther down the passage was much too tall even for the overgrown housemaid. But on the other hand, what was the surprise of Colonel Malpas—for he it was, dressed in the female apparel—on beholding Lady Sackville emerge, *not* from the room opposite, but from one higher up the passage? The Colonel heard her pronounce a female name, followed by an imperious "Come hither!" and he instantaneously perceived that it was he himself who was thus taken by Venetia for some servant-maid.

A sudden change came over the Colonel; for he felt all in a moment that the opportunity was now serving him. A glance rapidly flung behind showed that the Captain had closed the door of the little chamber on ignominiously kicking him out of it: for the gallant officer intended to remain concealed in that room at least until he thought the Colonel had had time enough to get clear out of the palace; so that the authorship of this ludicrous sport might not be suspected. For Captain Rolando Tash had a certain opinion of his own dignity, and did not choose to compromise it by being discovered in the act of engendering such a practical joke as this.

Thus was it that all in a moment the wheel of fortune made a complete revolution, and circumstances transpired in favour of the Colonel. Captain Tash had shut the door—Jessica was still prosecuting her search in other parts of the palace—and Venetia was in a room close at hand. Thither therefore did the Colonel speed without another instant's hesitation,—all his recent fears being absorbed in the hope of coming triumph. The moment he appeared on the threshold of the boudoir, Venetia, who had returned to her seat on the sofa, started up and gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and alarm: for at the very first moment that tall figure appeared in the doorway, she saw that it was not the housemaid but a man in female apparel—and the next moment she recognized the Colonel!

But even while that ejaculation was still thrilling from her lips, Malpas closed the door—locked it—and drew forth the key: then, tearing off the cap and gown, he secured the key in his breeches' pocket, exclaiming in a tone of mingled malice and triumph, "Now, Venetia, you are in my power!"

"Where have you been? and what means this masquerading frippery?" demanded Lady Sackville, still maintaining a bold front, although she felt that she was now entirely in the Colonel's power.

"Ah! your ladyship was guilty of a cruel perfidiousness," exclaimed the Colonel, "in letting that scoundrel Tash loose upon me. But enough of the past: the present absorbs all considerations."

"Tash did you say?" exclaimed Venetia. "Have you then met the Captain within these walls?"

"How can you pretend ignorance on that head?" rejoined Malpas. "Was not the villain posted in the very room opposite that where you were just now? Ah! you did not think it enough to make a dupe and a fool of me, and to tell me from inside the door of one room that you had changed your mind, but you must set that whiskered bravo to lay wait in another room to steal forth—pounce upon me when your maid left me—and then, after the most terrible threats, compel me to put on this debasing attire. Ah! Lady Sackville, it was too bad—it was too bad! But the moment of triumph—I might almost say revenge—has now come!"

And thus speaking he literally sprang upon Venetia—threw his arms around her splendid neck—and despite her struggles, covered her face, her shoulders, and her bosom with his hot and burning kisses.

"Release me, villain!" she said, in accents half-stifled with rage: "or I will scream!"

"Scream then!" cried Malpas. "Bring the whole household hither, and I will proclaim all I know—that Curzon is your paramour——"

"O villain that you are!" exclaimed Venetia, now seeming like a tigress goaded to fury. "But I will have a terrible revenge!"—and flinging him from her with a force which would even have been tremendous for a man and was perfectly marvellous for a woman, she sprang towards the table where a silver fruit-knife was lying.

Malpas, whose passions of revenge, malignity, and desire, were all aroused to the highest pitch, was armed with that brutish energy which, under such circumstances, supplies the place of real courage on the part of the coward; and he was perfectly desperate in his resolve to gratify his maddening impulses. Quick as thought did he divine her intention as she sprang to the table; and bounding forward even more swiftly than she, he clutched the knife.

"Venetia," he cried, instantaneously turning upon her and brandishing the knife over her head, "I am desperate—you have goaded me to madness—your insults——"

"For God's sake be reasonable, Malpas!" she exclaimed, her cheek now growing pale with terror as she saw indeed that he was furiously excited.

"Don't talk to me of reason," he said, in a voice that was hoarse with concentrated passions. "Yield yourself to me—or by all the powers of hell I swear——"

"Put away that knife, I beseech—I implore you," cried Venetia, fearful that he was really going mad.

"No," he rejoined in the same thick hoarse accents as before: "for you are so experienced in trickery—— Besides," he suddenly exclaimed in a clearer and more excited voice, "I know full well that you will not surrender yourself through love, and that therefore it must be through fear!"

"But if I do surrender, will you keep all my secrets?" asked Venetia, scarcely able to repress the accents of anguish and despair which rose up from her very heart's core to mingle with the tones of her voice.

"Assume a friendly demeanour towards me," answered Malpas, in a milder manner than before, "and I shall be friendly towards you. Ah! dear lady, if we could only forget the past and enjoy the present, the future should never be embittered, so far as you are concerned, by word or deed of mine!"

"I accept the assurance," responded Venetia, whose feelings at this moment were not enviable even by a person about to be hanged: "and I surrender! Hush, hush!" she immediately added in a lower voice: "some one is at the door!"

"No treachery, mind!" said the Colonel, in a deep whisper, as he clutched her violently by the arm.

"You shall see whether I intend it," rejoined Venetia: then as a second rap was heard at the door, she advanced towards it, and said, "Is it you, Jessica?"

"Yes, my lady," was the answer given by the abigail outside.

"You may retire," Venetia immediately said: "there is nothing more to be done to-night."

Having thus spoken, the proud, the brilliant, the envied, and the worshipped Lady Sackville turned towards the man whom she detested, and on whom she now cast her troubled, humiliated, and submissive looks with an air as if she were gazing upon destiny itself!

CHAPTER CXLIII.

THE HUSBAND'S RETURN.

We must now direct the reader's attention to Lord Sackville, whom we have seen sallying forth at about half-past ten on this memorable night in consequence of a letter which he received. That billet, written in an elegant female hand and so sweetly perfumed, was from the Countess of Curzon, and ran as follows:—

"*Ten o'clock at Night.*

"It is absolutely necessary, my dear Horace, that I should see you to-night; and as we must have a *long* conversation together, perhaps you will be enabled to afford me the pleasure of your society for a few hours. The usual arrangements can be carried into effect, so that the domestics need not suspect anything. Gertrude, who will deliver this note at Carlton House, will afterwards proceed to our amiable and accommodating friend's in North Audley Street, where I shall be presently. You understand?

"If you cannot come, then must you send me a note making some appointment for to-morrow. It is absolutely necessary we should meet as early as possible.

"Your affectionate

"EDITHA."

Such were the contents of the note which Lord Sackville had received in the manner already described; and leaving the Prince and Captain Tash

to amuse each other, he at once issued forth from the palace. Taking a hackney-coach in Pall Mall, he ordered it to drive to North Audley Street; and on arriving there, he directed the coachman to turn into the little bye-street into which the convenient side-door of Lady Lechmere's house opened.

Not many minutes was Lord Sackville kept waiting: for the side-door was presently opened, and forth came a lady enveloped in the ample cloak and the thick veil belonging to Gertrude. The moment she stepped into the vehicle, Sackville ordered the coachman to drive to Oxford Street; and as the man hastened to obey the instructions thus given, Horace and Editha commenced the hurried conversation which we are about to record.

But we must pause for one single moment to observe that as the hackney-coach rumbled away out of the narrow street, a young man, who had hitherto remained concealed in a doorway a little farther down, and who had been intently watching what was taking place, emerged forth from his concealment and followed in the track of the vehicle.

We now return to the tender pair who are ensconced inside the hackney-coach which the young man was thus pursuing.

"My dear friend," said the Countess, throwing up the veil and exchanging fervid kisses with her paramour; "a crisis has now arrived!"

"Ah!" your husband, the Earl?" said Sackville, throwing his arms around her and drawing her close to him as the hackney-coach rumbled along.

"I have received a letter from him to say that he will be home to-morrow evening," continued Editha. "The letter was brought by hand—it was sent through his banker, or lawyer, I suppose——"

"When did you receive it?" asked Lord Sackville, quickly.

"This evening, at about nine o'clock," returned Editha.

"And whence is it dated?"

"From Dover. It says that he has returned home through Belgium, by way of Ostend——"

"And he intimates that he shall be home to-morrow night?" asked Sackville, in a voice which showed that some unpleasant misgiving had sprung up in his mind.

"Yes—to-morrow night," responded Editha. "The letter states that he is so ill through sea-sickness experienced during a rough passage from Ostend to Dover, that he is compelled to remain a day at the latter place——"

"Editha," interrupted Lord Sackville, in a tone of alarm; "we are betrayed by some means or another: treachery is intended!"

"Ah! now you terrify me," exclaimed the Countess, in accents of dismay.

"Did no suspicion strike you when you received that letter?" asked Lord Sackville. "Situated as you are with your husband, and with the great coolness existing between you, it is not probable that he would write you a letter of such a character unless it were meant to throw you off your guard and cover some deep design which he has formed. How often has he written to you during this nearly five months' absence of his upon the Continent?"

"Only twice—and then in the most laconic manner," answered the Countess. "Indeed, I showed you his letters. One was from Milan—the other from Geneva——"

"And they both stated that you need not write to him in reply, as his movements were so uncertain he could not be assured of remaining long enough at any one place to receive answers from England?"

"And accordingly," rejoined Editha, "I never did write to him during his absence——"

"An absence," added Lord Sackville, "for which he condescended to allege no reason."

"An absence indeed," said Editha, "as unaccountable as the journey itself was suddenly undertaken. But of all that I do not complain—I have no right to complain—and you well know *why*," she added, in a tone of mingled tenderness and melancholy.

"Yes, dearest Editha, I do indeed now feel that matters are approaching a crisis," responded Sackville, also with alarm in his tone. "Depend upon it that at this very moment some danger is hanging over our heads—or we are about to fall into some snare that is set for us! Instead of your husband returning *to-morrow night*, I will stake my existence that he will be back *to-night*. Perhaps he has already arrived! Ah! I can see it all. Suspecting you, he thinks that such a letter as he has written will produce the very effect which it has indeed produced—namely, to prompt you to make the most of the few hours that thus seem to be yours previous to his return to-morrow night——"

"Yes, yes—I partake all your terrors—I see it all in the same light as yourself," said Editha, who was truly unhappy. "Indeed when that letter came at nine o'clock this evening, delivered by some messenger who immediately departed, I was filled with misgivings—and Gertrude also shared them. Ah! the faithful and intelligent girl!—she besought me not to think of seeing you to-night: but I was bewildered—I was frenzied—I was driven half mad at the prospect of disgrace—and my agitated feelings got the better of my prudence, so that I sent for you!"

"Well, dearest Editha," said Horace, "whatever mischief is done, cannot now be recalled."

"And besides," resumed the unhappy lady, with a sort of hysterical quickness,—"suppose that our fears are unfounded—that the Earl really will not return until to-morrow—and that there is no pitfall dug to entrap us—it is but a postponement for a short space, perhaps only a few hours: for exposure, scandal, and ruin must come at last!"

"Yes—you speak but too truly, my poor Editha," said Horace, straining her to his breast and kissing away the tears that were now trickling down her cheeks. "Four months and a half he has been absent——"

"And three months am I advanced in the way to become a mother," murmured Editha in accents broken by half-stifled sobs. "Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed, in a paroxysm of hysterical excitement; "disgrace must inevitably overtake me—it cannot be avoided! It is impossible the Earl can be made to believe that he is the father of the child I bear in my bosom: and, as I have already told you, his suspicions were awakened even previous to his departure——"

"Think you that he has ever been absent at all?" asked Sackville suddenly. "What if the two laconic letters received from Milan and Geneva were posted in those cities by some friend to whom your husband sent them?—what if all the while he has been concealed in London, watching the progress of our amour——"

"No—I do not fancy *that* for a moment," answered Editha. "Besides, even if it were so, our precautions have been so well taken, we might defy all his pryings and peerings: for not even do the very domestics suspect that I have once slept away from the house or once done aught which a lady of virtue might not do. But it is my position that threatens me with exposure——"

"Then what is to be done?" asked Lord Sackville, evidently much bewildered and alarmed. "What would you have me do, dearest Editha?"

"I know not—I know not," responded the Countess, sobbing in his arms. "Never, never was I so unhappy as I am at this moment! I seem to have lost all courage—all energy: and I feel that the moment is at hand when my name is to be added to that catalogue of family depravity, scandal, and disgrace, in which the names of so many of my nearest relatives already figure!"

"Sustain your fortitude, I implore you," said Horace, in his most soothing tones, and accompanying his words with the tenderest caresses.

At this moment the hackney-coach stopped in that part of Oxford Street which is close to Soho Square; and Lady Curzon drew down her veil ere her paramour handed her forth from the vehicle. Then, dismissing the hackney coach, Horace gave the trembling Editha his arm, and conducted her hastily to the fashionable house of infamy kept by Mrs. Gale in Soho Square.

Two or three times, as they thus passed from Oxford Street to the house alluded to, did Lord Sackville turn his head to ascertain whether any one was following them: but he saw nothing to excite his suspicion that such was the case. And yet that young man who had followed the hackney-coach from the bye-street by the side of Lady Lechmere's dwelling, had never once lost sight of the vehicle: but, aided by the street-lamps, he had kept it in view; and as it did not proceed at a pace calculated to outstrip him, he had no difficulty in thus keeping in its track, till it stopped in Oxford Street: then, on beholding the gentleman and lady alight, the young man continued to follow them at such a distance as to elude observation when Horace turned his head, as above stated.

Thus was it that the spy kept Lord Sackville and the guilty Countess in view, until they entered Mrs. Gale's establishment;—and then he posted himself at some little distance, but at a point whence he could maintain a strict watch upon the front-door of the house of infamy.

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We must now return to North Audley Street.

At the very moment that the hackney-coach, containing Lord Sackville and Editha, rolled away, followed by the young man, the Earl of Curzon himself knocked at the door of Lady Lechmere's house.

"Is her ladyship at home?" he inquired of the domestic who immediately answered the summons.

"Yes, my lord," was the reply.

"And I believe that the Countess of Curzon is with her?" said the Earl, assuming an air as if nothing were wrong.

"Yes, my lord," was again the reply. "Her ladyship the Countess arrived about a quarter of an hour ago——"

"Ah!" so I understood in Grosvenor Street," said the Earl, alluding to his own mansion. "I have only just returned from the Continent, and learnt that the Countess had come to pass the evening with Lady Lechmere. Did you happen to hear at what hour the Countess ordered the carriage to return for her?"

"At midnight, my lord," answered the livery-servant. "But here is my mistress."

At this moment Lady Lechmere, who had heard the double knock at the door, was seen descending the stairs; and a shade suddenly passed over her countenance as she caught sight of the Earl of Curzon. But instantaneously recovering her presence of mind, she extended her hand with a graceful smile, saying, "And so your lordship has returned from your Continental trip? But pray walk in:"—and she conducted him into a parlour opening from the hall.

"Your ladyship is very kind," said the Earl, as she desired him to be seated: "but——"

"Oh! if you are in a hurry, I will not attempt to detain you," she exclaimed, with well affected self-possession; though in her heart she experienced a misgiving. "When did you come home?—for I understood that you were not expected until to-morrow evening."

"But it suited me," my lady," said the Earl, with a peculiar smile of malignity and in a tone of irony which enhanced Lady Lechmere's uneasiness,—"it suited me to return earlier than I was expected. I believe Editha is with you?"

"Yes—she is come to pass the evening with me," said Lady Lechmere, her looks now again betraying her confusion. "But to tell you the real truth," she added, "your dear Countess, whom I love as if she were my own daughter, has been suddenly seized with a slight indisposition. There is no danger—it will soon pass away—but she has gone up-stairs to lie down for an hour or so——"

"Indeed!" remarked the Earl, with increasing irony of tone. "She must have been seized very suddenly: for it can scarcely be a quarter of an hour since she entered your ladyship's house."

"Yes—it was very sudden," returned the wily and dissolute patrician lady, who, having been an utter profligate during her own youthful years, had now become, on the shady side of existence, a base pander to the profligacies of others. "But you do not look well, Lord Curzon. Will you take some wine? I have the most delicious champagne——"

"I thank your ladyship—but I would rather not," answered the Earl, in a cold tone and with a stiff bow: then, in a peculiar accent and with a look of ominous meaning, he said, "Of course my dear wife is most anxious to see me; and your ladyship can well understand that I am equally desirous to fold her in my embrace. Perhaps you will permit me to see her?"

"But she is fast asleep," exclaimed Lady Lechmere, scarcely able to conceal her fright. "Surely you would not disturb her?"

"There is no necessity to disturb her," said the Earl, with a most provoking persistance in his object; so that Lady Lechmere suddenly conceived so bitter a hatred for him, she could almost have assassinated him on the spot—that is to say, if she

had a weapon ready at hand. "There is no necessity to disturb her, I repeat," continued the Earl: "I will enter the room on tiptoe."

"But, my lord," said the infamous woman, now trembling visibly: "what would be thought by the servants if they saw me conducting you up-stairs to that part of the house where the bed-chambers are situated?"

"What *could* they think, madam," asked Lord Curzon, with an ironical smile, "except that I was going to the room where my wife was lying indisposed?"

"But the world is so very wicked," rejoined Lady Lechmere, battling hard to dissuade the nobleman from his purpose.

"Your ladyship forces me by this ridiculous argument," said the Earl, "to remind you that what might have been probable ten or fifteen years ago, is not by any means so likely now:"—and he gazed with a significant look upon the lady as he thus reminded her that she was considerably on the shady side of forty.

"Ah! is your lordship so ungallant as to hint that I am getting old?" she exclaimed, affecting a tone of good-tempered remonstrance.

"Let us not diverge from the subject of our discourse," said the Earl. "If you be really afraid of scandalous tongues, let one of your maids accompany us to the room where Editha is lying asleep."

"But the doctor has declared that she must not be disturbed," exclaimed Lady Lechmere, thus making a desperate attempt to clinch the matter at once.

"What! is my wife so bad that the doctor has been sent for?" exclaimed Curzon, superciliously.

"It is positively so," responded Lady Lechmere, with a new accession of courage, and therefore meeting the Earl's look with a brazen effrontery.

"Well, upon my word," he cried, laughing in bitter mockery; "this is the most curious thing I ever knew in my life! Here have we my Editha, who before she has been a quarter of an hour under your ladyship's roof on the present occasion, has been seized with illness—conveyed to a couch—visited by the doctor—fallen into a sound sleep —— And I suppose that even the doctor himself has gone? Really, I do not believe that so much was ever summed up in so short a space before!"

"I do not understand this tone and manner which your lordship thinks fit to assume," said Lady Lechmere, who, finding that cajolery, remonstrance, and effrontery had all been used in vain, now as a last resource adopted an air of indignation. "What interest have I in deceiving your lordship?—for what do you take me?—and how dare you come with such a demeanour to my house?"

"Ah! since your ladyship puts the matter upon this footing," exclaimed the Earl, "it is necessary that I should speak out. Indeed we have been standing here trifling with each other too long. All this fencing with excuses is useless on your part; and therefore let us handy words no more. Madam," he said, suddenly assuming a stern and resolute look, "I demand instantaneously to see my wife!"

"And I declare, my lord," replied Lady Lechmere, adopting an aspect of defiance, "that you shall *not* do as you like beneath my roof!"

"Then you will force me to create a scandal and an uproar in the house, by pushing my way in spite of opposition to the chamber where, as you allege, my wife is lying down:"—and as the Earl thus spoke, he took up his hat and turned towards the door.

"My lord, you cannot—you would not—you dare not do this," faltered Lady Lechmere, now terribly alarmed.

"I will do it—on my soul, madam, I will do it!" exclaimed Curzon. "Now decide—will you conduct me to that chamber? or shall I find my way thither by myself? And perhaps," he added, with a look of peculiar malignity, "it will not be so difficult as you fancy. Let me see?—up two pair of stairs—then along a carpetted passage—into a bed-chamber where a second door communicates with a back staircase—and in that staircase there is a signal bell, and at the bottom a door opening into the bye-street ——"

"Good heavens!" cried Lady Lechmere, turning ghastly pale as the Earl of Curzon thus gave utterance to those details which displayed his perfect knowledge of the privacies of her dwelling-house: for the reader will remember that Colonel Malpas had given the Earl a full account of all these matters at the hotel at Lausanne.

"Ah! I thought that I should produce some effect upon your ladyship," exclaimed Curzon, enjoying her confusion. "Now will you hesitate to conduct me thither?"

Lady Lechmere rose from her seat—accosted the Earl with haggard looks and convulsing form—and placing one of her trembling hands upon his arm, said in a low thick voice, "Tell me how you know all this—tell me who has been the betrayer!"

"Well, I do not know why I should keep the secret," said the Earl: "and indeed I may answer your question if it be only to prove how entirely everything is known to me. Learn, then, that from the lips of one of my wife's paramours—Colonel Malpas——"

"The villain! I always knew he would betray her!" ejaculated Lady Lechmere. "You are aware, then," she continued, her voice again becoming thick and hesitating, "that your wife——"

"Is *not* beneath your roof at this moment," exclaimed the Earl; "but that Gertrude is here in her stead—and that when the carriage comes at midnight, then Gertrude, dressed as her mistress and closely veiled, will enter the vehicle and be driven home to Grosvenor Street. Such," added the Earl, with bitter irony, "are the precautions adopted to prevent my lacqueys, coachman, and grooms, from even suspecting the freaks and pranks of her profligate mistress. I must say that if every lady of fashion and rank were equally cunning in devising measures to lull suspicion asleep and defy detection, the public would miss many and many a rich treat of *crim. con.* which the public journals serve up in so enticing a manner."

"Now, my dear lord, be reasonable—expose not your wife," urged Lady Lechmere. "Only reflect——"

"Aye, but I wish in the first instance," said the Earl, with a look of deep meaning, "to take my revenge on that minx Gertrude, who has so long and so successfully pandered to Editha's depravities."

VALENTINE MALVERN AND FLORENCE EATON.

"And the revenge which you propose to take?" said Lady Lechmere inquiringly.

"Oh! it is my intention to fall into the spirit of the frolic," said the Earl, with a forced laugh, "and treat her exactly as if I believed her really to be my wife. No matter if the room be blazing with lights, I shall affect to be so blind as to judge by the apparel and not by the features. For that Editha and Gertrude have changed dresses up in that room, I have no doubt. Now, madam," added the Earl, suddenly throwing off his air of bantering irony and assuming a peremptory tone and manner, —"I enjoin you, without another word of remonstrance, to accompany me to that chamber, which, if you refuse, I can so well find for myself!"

Lady Lechmere, seeing that there was no alternative, and hoping that the Earl meant to limit his proceedings to the pleasant vengeance which he proposed to wreak upon Gertrude, led the way from the parlour. Having conducted his lordship up the two flight of stairs, she led him along the carpetted passage: but when within a few yards of the door at the end, she paused, and said in a low whisper, "Shall I go in advance to prepare the girl for your appearance?"

"Not at all, my lady—it is not necessary," at once answered the Earl. "I presume the door is unlocked?"

"Yes," replied Lady Lechmere. "But I thought you wished me to accompany you?"

"Not farther than this point," immediately rejoined the Earl: and opening a door which fronted the spot where they had thus halted, he said in a quick peremptory whisper, "Your ladyship will please to walk in here—for I see that the room is unoccupied."

"But what on earth do you mean?" asked Lady Lechmere, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"I mean simply that I am going to lock your ladyship in here for an hour, while I talk to Ger-

trude in the other room. Because," continued the Earl, "to tell you the truth, I do not choose you to have the opportunity of sending off a message to warn my delectable wife at Mrs. Gale's of my presence and proceedings here this night. She fancies, no doubt, that I shall not return until to-morrow, and in that belief let her remain."

"But, my lord—you cannot think of imprisoning me here for an entire hour?" said Lady Lechmere, in a low voice so as to avoid being overheard.

"No harm can arise," rejoined the Earl, who seemed to have an answer ready for every remonstrance. "It is only eleven o'clock, and the Countess ordered the carriage for twelve. This interval of an hour you would have passed in yonder room with Gertrude, if I had not come to interrupt your proceedings: therefore you will not be missed by the domestics."

Again did Lady Lechmere see that the Earl of Curzon was resolute in carrying his purposes into execution; and dreading an exposure which would cover her with disgrace and infamy by revealing her in the true light of a patrician demirep and procuress, she resigned herself to the hour's captivity in the bed-room, the door of which Curzon now locked upon her. Then putting the key into his pocket, the Earl hastened on to the end of the passage; and opening the door, he entered the room where Gertrude, dressed in the costume of the Countess, was reclining negligently upon a sofa.

CHAPTER CXLIV.

THE EARL'S VENGEANCE.

It was the custom of Lady Lechmere, whenever these manœuvrings were going on with respect to Editha and Gertrude, to remain in the room which thus so conveniently served the purpose of the intrigue: and this she did not only to sustain the idea amongst her dependants that she was thus closetted for hours together with her bosom-friend the Countess of Curzon, but likewise to guard against any intrusion into this chamber. Gertrude, therefore, always felt completely at her ease and was lulled into perfect security whenever she was thus performing the part of her mistress at Lady Lechmere's house.

On the present occasion the handsome young lady's-maid, dressed in a velvet robe belonging to her mistress, was reclining negligently upon the sofa as the Earl of Curzon entered the room. As he opened the door quietly and without violence, Gertrude thought it was Lady Lechmere coming back; and she did not immediately turn her head. But as the Earl stood still to survey the half-recumbent form of the good-looking Gertrude, she wondered that Lady Lechmere (as she fancied it to be) should have stopped short;—and suddenly looking round, she gave vent to an ejaculation of dismay as she recognized her master.

"Ah! my dear Editha," said the Earl, affecting to believe that it was his wife; and as he at once advanced towards the sofa, he purposely overturned a little work-table on which stood the two wax-lights: then, as the candles were thus suddenly extinguished and utter darkness prevailed all in a moment, he placed himself on the sofa and took Gertrude, in his arms, saying, "I beg you ten thousand pardons, my dear Editha, for my awkwardness in thus upsetting the table and putting out the lights: we can, however, converse just as comfortably in the dark. But why do you tremble?"—and he covered the cheeks and lips of the lady's-maid with kisses.

For the moment Gertrude was completely bewildered. Could it be possible that the Earl had failed, in the rapid glance he threw upon her, to observe that it was *not* his wife, but her maid! and was it purely through accident that he had upset the table? Such were the questions which Gertrude rapidly asked herself. But how could she answer them? Indeed she knew not what to think.

"My dear Editha," continued the nobleman, indulging in certain little amourous licenses and tender dalliances which Gertrude dared not resist,—"it strikes me that you are cruel and unkind after my long absence from you. What! not a word—not a kiss! Come, if you will not speak, at all events press your lips to mine."

And as he thus spoke he strained Gertrude to his breast in such a manner that as their lips met, the abigail could not withdraw herself from the warm and exciting contact even if she were inclined.

"There! now I know by these kisses," continued the Earl, after several long and fervid caresses which he bestowed, and which Gertrude gave back again,—"now I know that you are not indifferent to my return. It is however an unexpected pleasure that I should find you thus amiable as to receive my caresses with so much fervour and give them back with kindred warmth. Let us say nothing of the past! I will not inquire what you have been doing during my absence; and you must not seek to know of me what I have been doing on the Continent. Therefore let no disagreeable thoughts mar our present enjoyment."

And still, as he spoke, he held Gertrude in his embrace, bestowing upon her such caresses as gave unmistakable proof of his ultimate intentions. Gertrude, although so thoroughly experienced in the ways of the world—so full of duplicity, and with such a genius for intrigue—had, nevertheless, retained her chastity: but her passions were strong, and they were now gradually being excited by this contact, in the dark, with a man, who, though she liked him not, possessed a handsome exterior. Moreover, on a former occasion, we have seen Gertrude willing to abandon herself to the Earl in order to save her mistress; and she was not the less inclined to do so on the present occasion. But still she asked herself, was it possible that the Earl really believed her to be his wife? or was all that he was now saying but a portion of some deeply-settled scheme of revenge?

"Now you will believe that I have grown quite uxorious, my dear Editha," he continued; "and you may think, perhaps, that I seem rather like a lover than a husband. Well, be it so! You are beautiful—your temperament is warm and voluptuous—you have every qualification to fit you for the pleasures of love. Wonder not, therefore, if I thus rejoice at the opportunity which enables me to revel in your arms immediately on my return."

And now, as his own passions were worked up

to an irresistible degree, the kisses which he bestowed upon Gertrude became more ardent—more fervid—so that his companion was inspired with the same volcano-like passion which now animated himself.

But we need dwell no longer upon this scene: suffice it to say, that the Earl of Curzon continued to affect the belief that he was really with his wife instead of Gertrude,—and that the young woman, excited in her passions and bewildered in her ideas, surrendered up her person to her master.

It was now close upon midnight; and Lord Curzon, gently disengaging himself from the embrace in which Gertrude held him—for it was *she* who had become amorous and tender now—said, "I believe you ordered the carriage at twelve? Come, put on your cloak and let us depart."

Gertrude, now more than ever wondering whether Lord Curzon really fancied that she was his wife, or whether he was still playing a studied part, felt about the room for the cloak which her mistress had left there for her use; and having put it on, she drew the hood far down over her countenance, as was her wont on these occasions.

"Now, dearest Editha," said the Earl, still speaking in the kindest possible tone: "give me your arm."

Gertrude did so, not knowing what on earth was to be the end of the present adventure: for her heart was beating with the lingering sense of passion's rapture, and also with vague misgivings of what might yet be coming. The Earl threw open the door of the room, and they emerged forth from the darkness into the passage which was well lighted: and now from within the depths of her hood did Gertrude fling a quick, searching, and anxious glance upon the Earl.

"Dearest Editha, how happy do I feel with you to-night!" he said, in a tone of such well-assumed tenderness and sincerity that Gertrude was still more confused and bewildered than ever: for though he met the quick and sideloug glance which she threw up at him, he did not appear to notice that it was *not* the countenance of his wife.

"What can it mean?" asked Gertrude within herself: "does he actually take me for his Editha? or is it all a horrible mockery which must presently end in some suddenly outbreaking storm? His conduct is not natural: no—it is not natural! He *must* have known that it was not his wife whom he ere now clasped in his arms!"

The girl's musings were suddenly cut short by an observation which Lord Curzon now made.

"By the bye," he exclaimed, "that dear, amiable, kind-hearted Lady Lechmere, who has been the means of procuring me this pleasant *tête à-tête* with my own dear wife, said that she would wait in this room."

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon stopped suddenly at a door in the passage; and unlocking it so quickly that Gertrude, whose head was muffled in the hood of the cloak, could scarcely tell whether it had been thus fastened or not, he threw open the door.

"Now, my dear Lady Lechmere," he immediately said, as the patrician procuress hastily came forth, "we are going to take our departure. I can assure you, that my sweet Editha and myself have passed an hour of unfeigned enjoyment. Strange as such a *tête à tête* between husband and wife may seem at the house of a friend instead of beneath their own roof, it nevertheless has its advantages: for I can assure you, my dear Lady Lechmere, that on the present occasion Editha and I have so completely made up all past differences, that we are better friends than on the day we were married. This temporary absence of mine has been beneficial in making us each reflect upon our little faults and failings towards one another: and, henceforth, we mean to prove an example to society—a true pattern-couple."

Thus speaking, in a hurried manner, but with a cheerful air, Lord Curzon, who had given an arm to Lady Lechmere, conducted the two females along the passage,—Gertrude on his right, Lady Lechmere on his left; and all the time he kept his looks so divided, as it were, between them both, that they could find no opportunity of exchanging significant glances. Thus Lady Lechmere, who understood full well all the horrible bantering which ran through the Earl's observations, was not able either to breathe a syllable, or throw a look that might prepare Gertrude for the winding-up of this strange drama. On her part, the young woman was still a prey to an uncertainty that every instant grew more painful: but, as the Earl still continued to treat her as if she were really the Countess, she, of course, sustained the part by keeping the hood drawn over her countenance.

The Earl continued to talk in the same strain as before, while he conducted his two female companions down the staircase; and, as he came within the hearing of the footman who was in the hall, he said, with all the appearance of the most genuine sincerity, "I am sure, my dear Lady Lechmere, the Countess must feel deeply grateful for the kind interest which you experience in her. I am sure that these evenings which she passes at your house are the happiest in her life. But, my dear Editha," he suddenly exclaimed, turning towards Gertrude, "how you muffle yourself up! Here, at the end of April too—when it is quite warm—I am sure it must be very unwholesome. At all events, throw back the hood!"

And suiting the action to the word, the Earl raised his hand so quickly, and drew back the hood so abruptly, that Gertrude had not even time to anticipate the proceeding: and thus, all in a moment, was the countenance of the lady's-maid revealed to the astonished footman who stood holding the front door open.

"Heavens!" ejaculated the Earl of Curzon, now affecting to be struck with dismay. "What does this mean?"

Gertrude, deadly pale, stood transfixed to the spot; while Lady Lechmere gave utterance to a groan of anguish, and sank down senseless at the foot of the stairs.

"What means all this, I demand?" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, pretending to be almost frantic. "Look—behold—here is my wife's maid, decked out in her mistress's apparel, even to the very cloak with the hood.——Ah! what a convenient hood!"

Lady Lechmere's footman, who stood at the hall-door, gazed with stupid astonishment upon this scene; for he, of course, had never supposed but that it was always the Countess herself whom the carriage had been wont to fetch, and who was accustomed to trip forth so well muffled up in that

cloak and hood. The lacquey, who was in attendance upon the carriage which had just arrived, hearing the strange exclamations to which his master was giving vent, peeped into the hall, and became a witness of the scene. To the coachman, who was seated on the box, did he hurriedly communicate what he thus beheld; and that functionary, leaping down, also looked into the hall to gratify his curiosity.

Indescribable was the scene of confusion which now followed. Gertrude, after standing for nearly a minute, gazing in speechless horror upon the Earl, fell into strong hysterics; for she now understood and experienced a full sense of the terrible revenge which her master was bent upon this night executing, and the first fury of which had overtaken Lady Lechmere and herself.

Leaving the servants to pay such attention as they chose to the mistress of the house, who had fainted, and to Gertrude, who was screaming in a fit, the Earl of Curzon sped forth from the hall.

"You see that your mistress is not here," he said, in a tone of well affected bitterness, as he encountered his coachman and lacquey on the door-steps. "But did you both mark well that it was the vile Gertrude who has adopted this stratagem to shield her still viler lady?"—then, without waiting for a reply, the nobleman jumped into the carriage, saying, "Perhaps we shall find the Countess somewhere else. Drive to Soho Square!"

The carriage-door was banged—the coachman clambered on his box—the lacquey sprang up behind—and away rolled the equipage. We need hardly say that the two domestics were astounded at what had just taken place. Although they had often thought it odd that when they went to fetch the Countess, at Lady Lechmere's house, she should on every occasion, *without a single exception*, be so closely hooded or so carefully veiled—yet never had they entertained the slightest suspicion that it was *not* the Countess whom the carriage on those occasions conveyed home. Now, however, that the explosion had taken place, they recollected many little circumstances which they wondered had not opened their eyes before as to the stratagem so artfully carried on by their mistress and her maid. On this point, however, we need not dwell: suffice it to say, that the coachman and the lacquey were highly delighted at the prospect of so fine a piece of scandal and so glorious an action for *crim. con.* against some one or another, which they now saw to be the inevitable results of this night's adventure.

By half-past twelve Soho Square was reached; and the Earl ordered the carriage to stop at a little distance from Mrs. Gale's. The moment the coachman reined in his horses, that same young man who had hitherto been keeping watch in the vicinage, hastened up to the carriage, and, approaching the window, said in a hurried tone of inquiry, "The Earl?"

"Yes," replied that nobleman. "What news, Theodore?"

"They are here," said Varian, glancing round towards Mrs. Gale's house, over the front door of which a lamp was burning.

"The Countess and Emmerson?" said the Earl, quickly.

"I have no doubt of it," was Varian's response.

"But your answer," exclaimed Curzon, "seems to imply a doubt. Are you not certain——"

"I posted myself where your lordship told me, in the bye-street," Theodore hastened to explain; "and I saw a female, closely veiled and cloaked, come forth from Lady Lechmere's side door. All took place as your lordship had led me to suppose. A hackney-coach was waiting, into which she entered, and it drove away. I followed it to Oxford Street—I saw a gentleman and lady alight—I pursued them at a distance—and lost not sight of them till they entered Mrs. Gale's door. Here I have since remained: and they have not come out again."

"Good! they are caught in a net," ejaculated the Earl. "But why did you at first speak in a doubting manner as to the identity of the parties?"

"I am not aware that I did, my lord," replied Theodore Varian; "unless it were, perhaps, because you so positively asked me whether I was sure it was the Countess and Emmerson. Now, I could not be positive; because the lady appeared closely veiled as she came forth from Lady Lechmere's house; and after she and her companion alighted in Oxford Street, I dared not approach them too closely, for fear they might see that they were followed—and this would have spoilt all."

"But you are certain that the man was Emmerson?" said the Earl.

"No, my lord—I cannot possibly be certain of it," answered Varian: "I did not approach close enough to see."

"But, at all events," persisted Lord Curzon, "you are confident that you never lost sight of the hackney-coach from the time it left Lady Lechmere's until it stopped in Oxford Street?"

"I am confident on that head," replied Varian.

"Then I am equally confident," said the Earl, "that the lady who issued forth from Lady Lechmere's was the Countess. That her companion is Emmerson is most probable—unless, indeed," he murmured to himself, "she has got hold of another paramour—which, by the bye, is not unlikely. But no matter who *he* is!"

Thus musing within himself, the Earl alighted from the carriage; and bidding the coachman wait, he and Varian stepped up to Mrs. Gale's front door. The knock which they gave was immediately answered by a female servant; for no one who applied for admission during the night at that house was ever kept waiting. The moment they passed into the hall, the servant, to whom Lord Curzon was well known, looked somewhat terrified on recognizing him: for the woman instantaneously suspected that an explosion was about to take place in respect to the Countess.

"My wife is up-stairs," said the Earl, slipping a handful of guineas into the servant's hand. "Come—I know your discretion and prudence, as well as your trustworthiness: but it is no use denying the fact. My wife is up-stairs, I say!"

"For heaven's sake, don't make a noise, my lord," interrupted the servant-woman in an imploring tone. "Besides, your lordship should remember that if *you* have been here now and then with a lady, surely your wife has an equal right to come here now and then with a gentleman?"

"Silence!" said the Earl sternly: "and now show me and my friend the way up to the room where my wife and her companion are. Not another word!—obey me or I shall commence the search myself."

The idea that his lordship would go peeping into every room throughout the spacious establishment, at once gave wings to the woman's feet; inasmuch as not for worlds would she have had the mysteries of the various apartments—or at least of two or three of them—violated by an intruder's gaze. For in one was a pious lady "whose praise was in all the churches," now sleeping in the arms of a private in the Horse Guards: in another was a Bishop, renowned for his piety, who had brought thither a young girl of about fourteen or fifteen, whom he was initiating in the ways of wickedness: in a third apartment there was a Judge, the sternest upon the bench, now in company with one of the most noted prostitutes about town;—and in a fourth there was a young lady of high birth, great beauty, and extraordinary accomplishments, clasped in the arms of her foreign music-master.

No wonder, therefore, was it if the discreet servant of Mrs. Gale's establishment felt auxious to prevent the veil being drawn aside from these mysteries: and accordingly, without any farther remonstrance or hesitation, did she lead the way up-stairs, followed by the Earl of Curzon and Theodore Varian.

"This is the door," she said, in a low whisper, as she paused at a particular chamber.

The Earl of Curzon's eyes now glowed with triumph—for he felt that the moment was come when he should be avenged upon Editha for all her former faithlessness towards him and all the treacheries which she had put in practice. Trying the handle of the door and finding that it was locked inside—as indeed he had of course anticipated—the Earl unhesitatingly threw himself with all his force against it and burst it open. A scream of terror and an ejaculation of rage burst simultaneously from male and female lips within the room, into which Lord Curzon immediately precipitated himself. Lights were burning upon the table; and by the aid thereof, the Countess and her paramour were at once discovered sitting up, in a startled manner, in the couch.

But that paramour, who was he? Not Emmerson the till-broker, as the Earl of Curzon and Theodore Varian had alike hoped and expected: but the husband of the brilliant Venetia—the handsome and accomplished Lord Sackville!

"Create no disturbance in the house," said Horace, instantaneously precipitating himself from the bed, and speaking in a hurried manner to the Earl of Curzon. "To-morrow I shall be prepared to give you such satisfaction as you may demand!"

Editha, covering her face with her hands, burst forth into a violent fit of sobbing; and Theodore Varian, so soon as he perceived that her ladyship's companion was *not* Emmerson, over whose exposure he had hoped to exult, withdrew upon the landing outside through motives of delicacy.

The Earl of Curzon did not immediately reply to Sackville's remarks, but stood gazing upon him with a sort of stupid dismay for nearly a minute. It was not however that Curzon was so very much astonished at discovering who his wife's paramour for the occasion thus was;—but it was because it instantaneously struck him that this was a visitation of retributive justice. For had not the Earl of Curzon intrigued with Sackville's wife? and how could the Earl himself now complain of Sackville's intrigue with Editha? Such was the thought that struck him suddenly as if with a sense of dismay, and held him speechless. But Sackville, so far from suspecting what was thus passing in Curzon's mind at the moment, attributed the consternation of his looks to quite another source.

"Considering all the friendship that has subsisted between us, Lord Curzon," he said in a tone of self-mortification and repentance, "you doubtless regard me as the perpetrator of an unparalleled atrocity?"

"Yes, my lord," responded the Earl, instantaneously recovering his presence of mind: "in such a light do I indeed regard your conduct. But of course you shall hear from me so soon as satisfactory arrangements can be made:"—then, turning towards Editha, he exclaimed in a tone of malignant triumph, "At length I have detected your ladyship! Everything is known to me—Gertrude has ere now been unmasked in the presence of Lady Lechmere's servants and of mine——"

"Ah! then the scandal and the exposure are complete?" exclaimed the Countess of Curzon, in a voice broken with convulsive sobs: but the next instant, as if suddenly animated with a lightning flash, she sprang from the couch—and in that state of semi-nudity she extended her bare and exquisitely-rounded arm, crying, "'Tis well, my lord! you have done your worst for the moment—you triumph doubtless! But whom is it that you thus crush? A poor weak woman, who loved you at first and who would have remained faithful to you ever, had not your neglect chagrined her and your infidelities alienated her affection from you! Can you wonder that I have gone wrong? Heaven is my witness that, with your example before my eyes, it would have been impossible for me to go right! But though you triumph *now* for the moment, yet may the tables be turned against you. In one respect, however, you will have your wish—you will get rid of a wife whom your constant profligacies render it inconvenient for you to keep, and whom your extravagancies make it impossible for you to maintain. From hence I depart at once—yes, and away from London I speed—perhaps from England altogether. One thing I implore you," she added, her voice suddenly becoming full of agitation and her looks replete with plaintive emotions, as she turned her eyes from her husband to her lover, and then back again on her husband;—"and this is, that you will not endanger your lives for one so little worth that proceeding as I?"

"Madam," said the Earl of Curzon, who had listened with impatience to this speech; "of *that* matter I am the best judge."

Thus speaking, he turned abruptly away and haughtily quitted the room: but recollecting something, he again turned back and said, "The carriage which called for your ladyship at Lady Lechmere's, now waits below and is at your service."

"Ah! even this crowning degradation has he put upon me! to expose me to the very lacqueys of our household!" exclaimed the Countess in a tone of rending bitterness—a tone in which the accents of

grief penetrated no longer, but were displaced by those of vindictive hate and rage: for she felt that to have brought the carriage to that house of infamy whither he had traced her, was an insult of so cowardly and atrocious a character that, bad though she might be, it exceeded all the bounds of legitimate chastisement.

Lord Curzon gave a scornful laugh in response to her ejaculation of fury; and once more turning on his heel, he quitted the room.

On the landing he found Theodore Varian waiting for him; and they issued from the house together. On thus emerging forth, the Earl coolly and deliberately said to the footman in attendance upon the carriage, "Your mistress is with a paramour at Mrs. Gale's house of fashionable accommodation. Go boldly—knock loudly at the door—and send up word by the servant that the carriage is waiting for her ladyship."

Then, having given this last instruction for the purpose of inflicting another torture upon his wretched wife, the Earl of Curzon hurried away on foot, accompanied by Theodore Varian.

"And now, my lord," said the young man, "what can be done in reference to Emmerson? For your lordship is pledged to me in the most solemn manner to do all you can to ruin that villain! Remember, your lordship owes me a debt of gratitude: for through me did you obtain possession of those five thousand guineas——"

"I have not forgotten the obligation I owe you," said the Earl; "and I shall cheerfully—indeed, most gladly—bring an action for *crim. con.* against Emmerson as well as against Lord Sackville. Do you not remember that some months ago you assured me that in Emmerson's writing-desk, to which you said you possessed a skeleton key, you discovered a letter from the Countess——"

"Yes, my lord—I remember it well," replied Varian: "it is not likely that I should have forgotten it! It contains damning proofs of her ladyship's guilt——"

"But you said at the time," remarked the Earl, "that you could not procure it, for fear of exciting Emmerson's suspicions."

"Oh! but that reason exists no longer, my lord," exclaimed Varian, in a tone of savage exultation. "I care not *now* how soon I leave that vile bad man again. During the past four or five months I have been able to do enough to lay the foundation of a vengeance so striking—so terrible——But no matter!" he observed, suddenly checking himself: "your lordship requires that letter of which we have been speaking—and to-morrow or next day you shall have it without fail."

The Earl and Theodore then separated,—the former to return to his mansion in Grosvenor Street, and there gloat over the ruin of Editha: the other to retrace his way to the humble but neat dwelling where he and Ariadne dwelt, and where he retired to rest in fiendish joy at the approaching downfall of Mr. Emmerson.

CHAPTER CXLV.

THE CAPTAIN ENJOYING HIMSELF.

We must now return to Carlton House, where, as the reader will remember, we left the Prince locked in a room with Mrs. Malpas—the Colonel with Venetia in her boudoir—and Captain Tash lying concealed in the housemaid's chamber.

Having ignominiously expelled therefrom the Colonel in his female attire, Captain Tash waited for about a quarter of an hour, when he fancied that Malpas must have got clear out of the palace; and finding that all was now still in the passage, and little suspecting indeed to what desirable quarters Malpas had managed to introduce himself, the Captain issued forth from the housemaid's bed-chamber. Returning to the dining-room and finding that Sackville had not come back,—remembering too that he had intimated he should not return until a very late hour,—the redoubtable Tash resolved upon sitting up for him. But perceiving that the decanters were well nigh emptied, he rang the bell violently.

"Plumpstead, my worthy fellow," said the Captain to the butler, who himself answered the summons under the impression that more wine was wanted,—"you behold me alone, without liquor and without a companion. Now, forasmuch as you are an excellent fellow and have the keeping of an excellent cellar, you shall forthwith bring up half-a-dozen bottles of the raciest vintage. You can then trot off to bed, as I will sit up for Lord Sackville. But stop one moment! Is my man Robin in your servants' hall?"

"He is, sir," was the reply.

"What is he doing?" asked Tash.

"He has worked himself into the darkest corner of the place," responded Plumstead; "and there he sits just for all the world as if he was afraid he was going to be eaten up."

"Ah! you see how modest and diffident he is," exclaimed the Captain. "That's the way I've disciplined him. You can tell him I want to speak to him."

The butler departed to execute these commissions; and in a few minutes he returned, bringing half-a-dozen of wine and followed by Robin.

"Set down the bottles," said Tash; "and I will decant them as I want them?"—then, as soon as Plumpstead had withdrawn, he exclaimed, "Now, Robin, sit down and make yourself comfortable. You see how nicely I have managed to get the run of the palace; and here I am, the bosom friend of Lord Sackville—the confidant of the Prince Regent—and smiled upon even by the beautiful Venetia, who does not forget the service we rendered her some time ago. Come, sit down, Robin, I say; and help me knock off this half-dozen of wine—for I mean to wait till Lord Sackville comes back."

Robin accordingly sat down with his master, who began a complete carouse, to which his former potations while sitting with the Prince were mere drops of water compared to Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Robin to some little extent threw off his timidity and reserve, and kept his master company. Thus two or three hours passed away, until at length Captain Tash's watch,—for he sported one now, and a very handsome one it was too,—informed him that it was close upon three o'clock in the morning. He now ordered Robin to be off home and get to bed; and the Man Friday accordingly took his departure from Carlton House. Captain Tash then opened the last bottle of the six, which he had kept as a special relish for himself; and he was just imbibing the

first tumbler—(ordinary glasses he affected not)—when the door opened and Lord Sackville made his appearance.

"Here I am, my lord, you see," said Tash, in a voice that was somewhat thick and husky, and also interrupted by the hiccoughs: for though the Captain was as well-seasoned a human cask as any in London, yet on the present occasion he certainly had imbibed a *leetle* too much.

"Ah! Tash, are you here still?" said Horace, who looked pale, careworn, and agitated—an appearance that was enhanced by the disordered state of his hair and apparel: for, as the reader may very well suppose, he had not tarried to make a very careful toilette at Mrs. Gale's. "Well, I am glad that you are here! Perhaps I shall want your services to-morrow or next day. But have you not been drinking a little?" he demanded, as he now observed the Captain's flushed countenance and heavy-looking eyes.

"No—not much," was the response: "about a dozen tumblers of curaçoa-punch before the Prince retired, and just those six bottles subsequently."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Horace, astonished at the quantity. "But no matter—I am glad you remained and felt yourself at home——"

"But what ails your lordship?" demanded Tash, who now, in spite of a little opaqueness of vision and obfuscation of ideas, could not help observing that there was something strange in Sackville's looks.

"I will tell you to-morrow," said Horace, fancying that the Captain was too drunk to converse upon so delicate a matter at the present moment.

"Nonsense, man!" exclaimed Tash: "tell me all about it now. If anybody has annoyed you, let me know who it is, and I will go and cut his throat from ear to ear: and if you have got into trouble about a woman, egad! we will make Robin marry her and patch up her reputation."

"Cease this jesting," said Horace, impatiently: "for if you purpose to act as my friend, you must exhibit due prudence and caution."

"Find a more prudent man than I am in all Europe, except perhaps here and there one," said Captain Tash, "and I'll consent to let him eat me up at a mouthful. Now then, propound your grievance. What is it? There's a woman in the case, I feel convinced——"

"A lady of high rank and of great beauty," said Horace, "whose name too is well known in the fashionable world. This lady has been detected with me by her own husband——"

"Daggers and blades!" said Tash, in the husky voice of semi-ebriety: "this is prettily romantic but infernally disagreeable. Who is the lady?—for I suppose all London will ring with it to-morrow."

"Yes," responded Horace: "the report will circulate like wildfire. 'Tis the Countess of Curzon."

"By Jupiter! I should not have thought it," exclaimed Tash, "From what I had heard, I fancied she was virtue itself."

"Never mind what you heard," said Horace: "here is a positive fact for you. The Earl has ere now discovered his wife and me together at Mrs. Gale's——"

"And a very respectable place too," observed Tash. "I once broke a bishop's head there for getting possession of a girl of mine, and knocked a doctor of divinity's eye out on another occasion because he wouldn't stand a second dozen of wine. But what has become of the Countess?"

"She has gone to one of her sisters for the rest of this night," answered Horace; "and to-morrow morning she means to leave London."

"But when did this take place?"

"Soon after twelve o'clock," replied Horace. "But the time has slipped away while I have been escorting the unhappy lady to her sister's, and then hurrying off to Lady Lechmere's to ascertain what had happened there and fetch her maid Gertrude——"

"Your lordship seems to be talking as if you thought I knew all about it," interrupted Tash.

"Ah, true!" exclaimed Horace. "But I cannot enter into details now—I am too excited——"

"Lie down and go to sleep," said the Captain; "and you will wake up quite refreshed and comfortable—ready to eat a good breakfast and then go out and fight a duel with Lord Curzon. For of course you want me to be your second; and of all offices in the world there is none that I fulfil so well as that. By all the daggers and cannons! I will stick to you to the very last; and you shall never leave the ground till you have either killed your adversary or been killed yourself."

"Do not prate in this manner, Tash," said Horace, impatiently. "But pardon my excitement—I am fearfully agitated——not that I dread the duel which is doubtless inevitable—but because it will create such a scandal——"

"Scandal, egad!" vociferated the Captain: "I wish to heavens that I was about to be the object of such scandal! Why, courted as you are now by all the fashionable world, it is nothing to the way in which you will be sought after, caressed, and lionized when once this affair is well blown. Upon my soul, you will become the envy of every man about town! When you go into society you will soon see that 'tis much better to have the reputation of a good *crim. con.*, than to carry about with you the sanctity of a bishop. Ah! what a triumph is in store for you! The moment you enter a ball-room, you will have all the old dowagers tapping you with their fans, and saying, '*Ah! the naughty man!*' while they lick their old lips and wish to heaven that their young and beautiful days had not passed. Then good-looking mammas of between thirty and forty will pretend to be horrified, and holding up their hands, will exclaim, '*Don't come near me, Lord Sackville: it is really quite shocking of you!*' and at the same time they will look up with such ardent longing into your face that it will be your own fault if you don't revel in the conquest of all the finest women in London. But the young ladies—the unmarried ones—the Misses——Ah! *that* will be quite charming! What wicked looks will be thrown upon you!—what sly glances flung sidelong from eyes flashing with the nascent fires that the very idea of your doings will excite in the virginal bosom! In fact, it will be a perfect triumph for your lordship; and it makes me quite sentimental and romantic when I think of it. But by the bye, what will her ladyship say?"—and Captain Tash jerked his finger up to a splendid portrait of Venetia which hung in the apartment

"Oh! I am not afraid of curtain-lectures," ex-

claimed Horace, scarcely weighing what he said. "I feel more for Lady Curzon, on whose head such dishonour has fallen."

"Well, my lord, go up to bed, I tell you," said Tash, "and cool your brain with a few hours' sleep. I will lie down on the sofa in this room, so that I shall be ready in the morning to act for you at once, should a hostile message come."

Lord Sackville followed the Captain's advice and sought his own bed-chamber, where, fatigued alike in mind and body, he fell into a profound slumber. The gallant officer, having finished the last bottle and just taken what he called "a thimble-ful" (half a tumbler) of brandy to sink it all, rolled himself off his chair upon the sofa, and there speedily became entranced in sleep.

When the Captain awoke, it was broad daylight; and looking at his watch he found it was eight o'clock. Stealing forth from the dining-room, he hastened along the passage and unlocked the door of the chamber in which the Prince and Mrs. Malpas had passed the night together. He then retraced his way to the dining-room, rang the bell, and ordered the servant who answered the summons to show him to a chamber where he might perform his ablutions. This was done; and when the Captain had shaved, washed himself, and had his clothes brushed, he declared that "he was ready to eat breakfast against any two men living."

A few explanations will now suffice to give the issue of the other adventures which occurred at Carlton House during the memorable night whereof we have been writing.

In the first place we must state that Mrs. Malpas succeeded in escaping unobserved out of the palace, but not without a previous understanding between herself and his Royal Highness as to some future meeting. The Prince gained his own dressing-room, likewise free from unpleasant notice, and by no means dissatisfied with the new conquest which he had achieved.

Let us now peep into Venetia's boudoir. There, at about eight o'clock in the morning, we shall find the lady herself still reclining in the couch where she had been compelled to abandon her charms to a man whom she detested. The Colonel was up and dressed: that is to say, so far as he could be, his coat and waistcoat having been left in the housemaid's room. But Jessica was summoned; and when the faithful abigail was admitted into the boudoir and found how her mistress had after all been triumphed over by the Colonel, she could scarcely conceal her indignation. A significant look, however, from her mistress induced her to hold her peace, by reminding her that she—the brilliant Venetia—was completely in the Colonel's power, but that the day of vengeance would sooner or later come. As for Malpas himself, he sought not even to conceal his sense of triumph and satisfaction: but this feeling was only expressed in his looks, and not in his words.

To be brief, Jessica procured his coat and waistcoat from the chamber of the housemaid, to whom she proffered some hurried excuse to account for those garments being there at all; and in all haste did she return with her burden to the boudoir. Thence she conducted the Colonel to the private issue from the palace; and as she parted from him, she said in a low but impressive whisper, "Remember, sir, that great though your triumph has been this night, 'tis not one of which an honourable man may boast."

"Her ladyship," responded Malpas significantly, "not satisfied with having sealed my lips with her kisses, has undertaken to fasten them still more hermetically with her gold. Indeed, we have a thorough, complete, and amicable understanding together!"

Thus speaking, he took his departure; and Jessica, giving vent to her disgust with a haughty toss of the head, hastened back to Venetia's boudoir. There she learnt from her ladyship's lips the history of the misadventure which had made the Colonel her companion for the past night, instead of the partner of his own wife's couch in the spare bed-room. But though Venetia could explain how the Colonel came with her, yet neither she nor her abigail could account for the extraordinary conduct which Mrs. Malpas had adopted in refusing him admission.

Having risen from her couch and performed her toilette, Venetia was about to sally forth to the Marquis of Leveson, in order to obtain from him a farther sum of five thousand guineas, wherewith to purchase secrecy of the extortioner Malpas,—when she received the following letter enclosing the bank-notes she had entrusted to Mrs. Malpas:—

"*Nine o'clock*, A.M.

"Immediately upon issuing from Carlton House, I enter a shop in Pall Mall, for the purpose of penning these few lines to your ladyship—not only that I may at once and without a moment's unnecessary delay enclose the large sum which your ladyship placed in my hand for a special purpose, but also to beseech your ladyship not to charge me with ingratitude for the part that I acted last night. Were I to inform your ladyship that when the instant arrived for me to receive my husband I changed my mind, you would not believe me, because your servant Jessica has no doubt informed you that the key disappeared from the place where you concealed it; and therefore the fact of my being enabled to leave the chamber ere now, must of course prove to you that the key had by some means found its way *into* the chamber. Your ladyship will hence conclude that something transpired of a totally unexpected nature, to interfere with our previous plans and compel me to refuse admittance to my husband when Jessica brought him to the door. Yes, Lady Sackville—something *did* transpire: but you will pardon me if I pass it over in silence. It is *my* secret, and must remain so. Doubtless I have forfeited your ladyship's friendship and good opinion? It is my misfortune—scarcely my fault. At all events, I beseech you not to attribute the occurrence to a wilful breach of faith or premeditated treachery on my part. What you will now do relative to my unprincipled husband, I know not: but I have little doubt that you will find means to propitiate, if not to *disarm* him in respect to his infamous designs towards yourself.

"The haste and anxiety I exhibit in penning these lines, will I hope convince your ladyship that it is my sincerest desire to divest myself as much as possible of the odium which in your ladyship's estimation may attach to my seemingly treacherous conduct of last night; and if I append no name or initials to this note, your ladyship will not imagine that I am afraid to allow such a document with my signature to remain in your hands. It is merely a precaution which I adopt, lest the note should fall into the hands of others."

"Ah!" said Venetia, on whose countenance a ray of intelligence had gradually beamed as she perused this singular epistle; "I now begin to understand the whole affair. It is as clear as daylight that

some lover, whom Mrs. Malpas preferred to her husband, found his way last night to her chamber. But who could it be? Captain Tash was closetted and concealed in the housemaid's chamber at the very time when you and Malpas gave the ineffectual summons at the spare bedroom door. The lover, then, was doubtless *already* at that moment in the room with Mrs. Malpas; and Captain Tash had no doubt been pandering to the suddenly improvised amour. Now, was that lover my husband or the Prince?—for between those two the matter appears most certainly to rest."

"Lord Sackville, please your ladyship," said Jessica, "went out soon after ten o'clock, and did not return till about three this morning. These facts I learnt from his lordship's valet."

"Then the lover of Mrs. Malpas during the past night," said Venetia, "*was* the Prince!"—and for a few moments a shade came over her resplendent brow, and she bit her scarlet lip with vexation. "But of that no matter!" she suddenly exclaimed: "I am not jealous of the Prince. I know full well," she continued, the glow of triumph lighting up in her eyes and flushing her cheeks, "that if he now and then wanders away for a short while from the sphere of my influence, with a look or a word can I bring him back to my feet. But I am angry—I am indignant—Oh! I am almost disgusted with myself," she cried in a state of excitement that rendered her grandly and terribly beautiful at the moment,—"when I think that discomfited, vanquished, and defeated, I was compelled to surrender myself to the arms of that dastard Malpas!"

"Your ladyship has ten thousand sources of consolation," said Jessica, "for one annoyance of this kind. Brilliant, courted, worshipped as you are, all kinds of happiness are within your reach and at your disposal——"

"Enough, Jessica!" cried Venetia, a profound mournfulness suddenly seizing upon her: and as a

deep sigh, amounting almost to a convulsive sob, made the rich volume of her bosom upheave as if it were about to burst from the prisonage of the corset, she turned aside for a moment and with a great effort subdued an outburst of grief.

Jessica said nothing—did not even appear to notice this sudden change in her mistress's mood; but bustled about the boudoir as if to arrange three or four things that required putting in order.

"Now, my excellent and faithful Jessica," said Venetia, after a pause of a few minutes, "you must at once take this money to Colonel Malpas and tell him that according to the compact entered into between us ere we parted, he will find another sum of a few thousand pounds at the banker's at Geneva when he arrives there. Here is the address of the hotel in St. James's Street where you will find him."

The abigail took the slip of paper which her mistress handed her, together with the Banknotes for five thousand pounds, and sallied forth to execute the commission just confided to her.

Another female servant now made her appearance with a tray containing Venetia's breakfast; and scarcely had she retired, when Lord Sackville entered the boudoir.

CHAPTER CXLVI.

THE AVOWAL AND THE DEBATE.

Though Horace had taken more than usual pains with his morning's toilette, in order to divest himself of an agitated appearance, his looks nevertheless at once showed that something unpleasant had occurred. Venetia instantaneously suspected that he had discovered the circumstance of Malpas having passed the night with her, and that he had come to reproach her. Not that he had any right, after the convenient compact made between him and his wife, to interfere with her little peccadilloes: but still it would have been natural enough for him to feel annoyed and disgusted at any seeming favour which she might have shown to such a wretch as Malpas.

Retaining however her self-possession, which indeed she seldom lost in the presence of others, she at once said, "Horace, something has occurred! What is the matter with you?"

"My dearest Venetia," he answered, placing himself by her side upon the sofa, "I have something important to tell you—something that you will doubtless hear from other lips presently, and which therefore you had better in the first instance hear from mine."

"But what is it?" she exclaimed: "something terrible, that it requires so solemn a preface?"

"I do not know whether you will scold me for getting into this scrape," said Horace, affecting a laugh: but it was only a sickly attempt at mirth.

"Ah! then it is some dilemma which you have got yourself into?" she said, now suddenly and completely relieved from any fears on her own account. "But what have you been doing, you naughty Horace?"

"Pardon me, dear Venetia," he replied, "if I first remind you of our compact——"

"But you told me of that yesterday, when I gave you the money you required," exclaimed his wife, wondering why he should recur to that subject.

"Yes—but you must forgive me if I now specially allude to it again," continued Horace; "because the dilemma in which I am involved——"

"Come—confess the truth without circumlocution," interrupted Venetia, with an arch look, and at the same time tapping him on the cheek with her fair hand. "You have got into some difficulty with a lady—is it not so?"

"Yes. But have you heard already——"

"No: I merely judge from your manner. You remind me of the compact—which is that you may have as many mistresses as you fancy, and I may have as many lovers as I like," continued Venetia, the carnation deepening on her countenance.

"Well, you have guessed rightly," said her husband. "But the dilemma is a very serious one. There will be exposure—scandal—law-proceedings,—and perhaps——indeed, most likely——"

"Ah! a duel," ejaculated Venetia, now turning very pale. "My dear Horace——But who is the lady?" she suddenly demanded.

"The Countess of Curzon," responded her husband.

"The Countess of Curzon!" echoed Venetia, with a slightly perceptible start: for she could not help being struck, at the moment, by the coincidence that *she* had been criminal with Editha's husband, and *her husband* had now been criminal with Editha.

"You are astonished?" observed Sackville. "Doubtless you considered Lady Curzon to be the very pattern of virtue and propriety?"

"Let us not dwell upon details," said Venetia, hurriedly. "Give me an outline of the adventure which has resulted in detection and exposure?"

Horace did as he was desired, and his wife listened with the deepest attention.

"And the Earl," she said, at the conclusion of his narrative, "has declared that he will have satisfaction? But he has not sent to you yet?—you have heard nothing from him this morning?"

"No. Captain Tash is with me," said Horace. "He will be my second if Curzon should indeed send me a challenge—as, of course, he is sure to do."

"But this challenge," said Venetia, hesitatingly,—"are you bound to accept it?"

"Good God! can you ask me such a question?" ejaculated Horace. "Even if I knew beforehand that Curzon's shot would stretch me dead upon the field, I must accept the challenge. Honour demands it: and if I have now come to break all this to your ears, it is simply because I did not wish you to receive the tidings suddenly, or through some channel which might misrepresent the facts."

"Misrepresent them!" exclaimed Venetia, now much agitated. "They cannot possibly be made worse—I mean, in respect to the danger which menaces you. Now, my dear Horace," she continued, in a tone that was tremulous with the strange and conflicting emotions agitating in her breast, "you know that, notwithstanding the destiny on whose waters I am launched—notwithstanding, indeed, the strange mode of life we lead—you know, I say, that I am fond of you. It was

our agreement, some months ago, that all sentimental allusions and maudlin professions of love, should cease between us: and, indeed, it would have been a mockery had we not resolved on such a course. Yes—a veritable mockery in the presence of the compact which allows each such unlimited license! But at a moment when your life is threatened, I may be permitted to observe that notwithstanding all that *has* taken place and all that *is* taking place, I still experience for you those feelings which will not permit me to hear with indifference of the danger which you are incurring. Indeed, I cannot bear the thought!"

"My dear Venetia, you will almost drive me mad," exclaimed Horace, "if you talk thus. You know full well that at the outset I loved you fondly—loved you madly—and in a few short months this affection has not been extirpated from my heart! No: and notwithstanding I have plunged into dissipations—notwithstanding I have been seduced into this intrigue, the secret of which has now so suddenly exploded—yet is there still a niche within my soul where your image is enshrined. The artificialities with which rank and wealth have surrounded us, have not destroyed all natural feelings within me. Besides, you know, Venetia—you can believe me when I declare—that I should have been happier had we on the day of our marriage retired to some humble and secluded cottage, rather than have plunged into the brilliancies, the elegancies, and the luxuries of a Court life! But having been compelled as it were to accept this latter destiny, it was better to yield to the force of the torrent and give way to all pleasures and profligacies, if only for the sake of drowning regretful or remorseful thoughts."

"Ah! my dear Horace," said Venetia, gently passing one of her arms round his neck and drawing him towards her;—"this is one of those scenes of tenderness which a husband and wife in our condition ought to avoid, and which nevertheless has its soothing influences—its ecstacies of pleasing pain—its paroxysms of torturing bliss! Yes, dear Horace, though shame be upon either brow—though when inspired by the best feelings of our nature, we dare not look each other in the face—and though now, as your cheek is pillowed against mine, each one burns with the flush of shame—nevertheless we are not indifferent to each other; and to me the thought is harrowing that in a few short hours thine handsome form may become rigid—thine eyes closed in the sleep of death! No, no—this duel must not be!" she added with passionate vehemence.

"But my honour will be compromised," said Horace. "Candidly speaking, Venetia, I am no coward—I do not shrink from death: and were I compelled to go forth with an army to battle, it would be in the foremost ranks I should be found. But I freely confess that it is hard—yes, it is hard—to stand the chance of being thus cut off in my earliest prime,—when rank, honours, and wealth have only just begun to lavish their favours upon me! Besides, Venetia, of the two courses which are open to every man in this life—namely, the good and the bad—I have chosen the latter; and for this sacrifice of all my betterinost feelings, the only compensation can be found in a long life of pleasure and enjoyment. These are the reasons which almost render me a coward when I think of this duel! And then, Curzon too," he added, "is a matchless shot—so experienced with the pistol that——"

"Oh! your words freeze the blood in my veins," cried Venetia, shuddering from head to foot. "No, no, my dear Horace—this duel must *not* take place!"

"Ah! vainly do you talk, my poor Venetia," said her husband: "for on the one hand the wretched *code of honour* will compel Lord Curzon to send me a challenge, and on the other will force me to accept it."

"And this is because he discovered you with his wife?" said Venetia in a musing tone, as she gazed abstractedly upon her husband: for it seemed as if some thought or scheme was now developing itself in her mind.

"Yes—that is the plain English of the matter," replied Horace.

"Ah! I understand," ejaculated Venetia: then as her eyes suddenly assumed another and peculiar expression, fraught with a deep and mysterious meaning, she said, "Do you remember, Horace, that on the first occasion you ever required money—it is now some months ago—you said that you consulted me, knowing that I was a woman fertile in expedients?"

"I remember it perfectly," returned her husband; "and I might reiterate the averment now. But what has that to do with the present position of affairs? Believe me, my dear Venetia, there are no means of staving off the present danger: it *must* be encountered boldly—although, to confess the truth," he added in a mournful tone, "I experience terrible misgivings amounting to a presentiment as to the result!"

"Then I beseech you, Horace, to put faith in my ingenuity!" exclaimed Venetia, with the air of one who already has resolved upon some settled plan of action.

"But remember, my dearest wife," said Horace, "that anything you might do in this matter would be to compromise my honour most seriously, because the challenge *must* be accepted——"

"Now, leave it all to me," interrupted Venetia, with one of her sweetest smiles accompanying a look of confidence and encouragement. "But I am about to give you an instruction which you must obey to the very letter——"

"Proceed," said Horace, wondering what possible scheme his wife could so suddenly have devised, but still experiencing sufficient faith in her prudence, tact, and knowledge of the world, to feel assured that in whatsoever she might do she would not compromise his honour in respect to this duel which appeared inevitable.

"Return you to Captain Tash, and remain with him until you receive a message from me," said Venetia: "then, so soon as Jessica repairs to you with the intimation that I wish to see you, do you come straight hither and enter the boudoir at once—without hesitation—and without the ceremony of knocking at the door."

Horace was about to inquire an explanation relative to this extraordinary instruction: but Venetia good humouredly cut short all farther discourse, and compelled him to quit the room.

A few minutes after her husband had thus left the boudoir, Lady Sackville rang the bell; and when Jessica answered the summons, she said

"You have returned, then, from executing the commission with Colonel Malpas?"

"Yes, your ladyship," was the abigail's reply. "I saw the Colonel—gave him the money—and delivered your message. He says that he shall set off at once; and as the north-western part of the Continent is now so unsettled in consequence of French affairs, he shall not attempt to pass along the Rhine, but shall take ship for the Mediterranean and by those means reach Geneva."

"Good!" said Venetia, in a tone of approval. "And now, my dear girl, you must at once proceed to Grosvenor Street and see the Earl of Curzon. If he be not at home wait for his return: and when you see him, tell him that if he values my good opinion and friendship he will at once pay me a visit."

"But has not your ladyship heard," said Jessica, stammering and hesitating, "of a certain circumstance? The whole town is ringing with it already. I heard the waiters talking of it at the door of the hotel where Colonel Malpas is staying. I also heard of it again at a shop where I stopped to buy something I required——But now your ladyship is prepared to hear it——"

"I know everything already," said Venetia; "so don't tarry to converse with me; but start off at once and deliver my message to Lord Curzon. Tell him that I have heard of what has taken place and that therefore I am well aware he cannot *openly* visit Lord Sackville's suite of apartments at Carlton House: tell him therefore that he is to accompany you hither, and you will introduce him by the private door—as it is absolutely necessary I should see him without delay."

Jessica accordingly sped upon this errand; and on arriving in Grosvenor Street, she found that Lord Curzon was at home, but engaged with his solicitor on urgent business. On hearing, however, that it was Jessica who wished to say a few words to him, he immediately granted her an audience in another room; and on receiving the message which she delivered, he appeared to be uncertain how to act. The abigail urged upon him the necessity of complying with her mistress's desire; and he gave his consent—for he not only was loth to quarrel with Venetia, but he was also anxious to hear what she might have to say, a presentiment informing him that it was relative to the transactions of the preceding night; though how Venetia purposed to interfere in them, he was at a loss to understand. However, to be brief, he dismissed his solicitor for a couple of hours; and bidding Jessica hasten homeward, he soon afterwards sallied forth and rejoined her in the neighbourhood of Carlton House.

The cunning abigail speedily introduced him into the palace, and led him unobserved to Venetia's boudoir, where he was welcomed in the most charming and flattering manner by the divinity of the place.

Having bade him sit down upon the sofa, Venetia told Jessica to withdraw; but as the faithful abigail was retiring, she whispered in her ear the following rapidly uttered instruction:—"Listen attentively for the boudoir-bell; and when you hear it ring, go and tell Lord Sackville that I wish to speak to him immediately."

CHAPTER CXLVII.

THE WIFE'S STRATAGEM.

We must now observe that during the interval of Jessica's absence to fetch the Earl of Curzon, Venetia had thrown off her gown and put on a loose morning wrapper,—thus leaving herself in an elegant undress. She likewise allowed her hair to flow in all its auburn richness and silken luxuriance over the shoulders which were now left bare in their dazzling whiteness; while a few stray tresses were suffered to fall around her throat and over her bosom, where they lay like dark gold upon polished ivory. Into her looks she had thrown all that sensuous wanton languor which rendered her so dangerously enchanting and so overpoweringly captivating in the presence of a man endowed with strong passions.

Nor was the effect of all this preparation on her part, and of the luxurious exposure of her rich and resplendent charms, lost upon the Earl of Curzon, notwithstanding his mind had been so much occupied with other things. Moreover, although he had once revelled in those beauties on which his eyes now settled eagerly and intently, yet it was but *once*—and that was far, very far from being sufficient to sate the strong passion with which Venetia had inspired him from the very first moment of their acquaintance.

The reader is of course aware that after a certain communication which Venetia had received from Colonel Malpas, she could not in her heart entertain anything like a favourable sentiment towards the Earl of Curzon. When with the Colonel on the Continent he had evidently talked of his amour with herself: perhaps, for anything that Venetia knew to the contrary, he had even boasted elsewhere and to others of the conquest he had obtained over her. At all events, he had betrayed the delicate circumstance to Malpas; and this was a crime which Lady Sackville was not likely to forgive. If then we find Venetia now affecting the amiable towards Curzon—smiling upon him—placing herself upon the sofa by his side, and at once bending upon him a look and assuming an attitude which seemed to declare that she was not unmindful of their past intimacy—if we behold her doing all this, it was because she had a special purpose in view, and a particular object to accomplish, to the carrying out of which she made all her feelings of dislike towards the Earl entirely subordinate.

"I thought, Charles," she said, "that the very first person you would have seen on returning to London, was myself:"—and as she thus spoke she threw into her looks an expression of tender reproach.

"My dearest Venetia," he said, "I should have communicated with you this afternoon. Most assuredly I should not have ventured to call upon you after the transactions which occurred last night, and in which I am so painfully and seriously involved with your husband."

"Come—tell me all about it," said Venetia, throwing one of her snowy arms round his neck, and leaning towards him in such a way that her bosom reposed upon his breast and she could thus gaze up into his countenance: "tell me, I say, all the particulars of this adventure—for you and I, Charles, at all events are not going to quarrel."

"You know not how unspeakably happy you render me by this assurance, dearest Venetia!" exclaimed Curzon, bestowing deeply sensuous caresses upon the wife of that man whom he was about to challenge to a mortal duel for having intrigued with *his* wife. "You look handsomer than ever, Venetia! —you are indeed grandly beautiful," he continued; and his fingers played with the shining tresses of her luxuriant hair.

"Well, you shall compliment me presently," she said, with a smile displaying the two rows of pearl which, gleaming in contrast with the moist scarlet of her lips, seemed the ivory portals through which the balmy breath of heaven itself came forth. "Tell me again, I ask you, the details of this adventure of last night."

"You must know, my dear Venetia," responded the Earl, "that for some time past—seven or eight months perhaps—I have suspected—or rather," he continued, "I have had positive proofs that my wife was a thorough intriguante——"

"And pray, are *you* the most immaculate of men?" inquired Venetia, with an arch smile.

"No—far from it," responded Curzon, snatching a kiss from her lips: but he immediately added, "I do not choose my wife to pursue a similar game——"

"Then how you must despise, scorn, and loathe *me?*" said Venetia, but with a certain haughty mockery in her tone. "Am not I a wife?—and yet have I not forgotten myself with *you?*—am I not likely to do it again——"

"Ah! but *you* are one of the world's exceptions," exclaimed Curzon, not knowing exactly what response to give: then after some little hesitation and with a certain confusion in his looks, he said, "But wherefore shall we continue this topic? It only makes me say things disagreeable to you; and I would not for the world offend or annoy you, Venetia."

"You neither offend nor annoy me," she observed, with a peculiarity of tone and look which for the moment seemed to have something sinister in it: but as her countenance suddenly lighted up, she exclaimed in a blythe voice, "I know very well that I am different from other women; and there lives not a man on the face of the earth who can either scorn or despise me."

"True—most true!" exclaimed Curzon, bestowing upon her another caress. "Well, I was about to explain that on the Continent I met a person who revealed to me all the secrets relative to Editha's misconduct, and how artfully she managed, by the aid of her principal tire-woman—a girl named Gertrude—to carry on her intrigues in such a way that none of the servants, save this confidential one, could possibly suspect what was going on."

"And who could have been base and mischievous enough to give you such information?" asked Editha, her suspicions instantaneously setting upon Colonel Malpas.

"Ah! my charmer, I must not tell you *that*," said Curzon, patting her face.

"Well, go on," she said, with an arch smile. "I do not wish to penetrate more deeply than you choose into your secrets. I suppose, however, that having gained this information on the Continent, you lost no time in turning it to account the moment you come back to London?"

"Such was indeed the case," rejoined the Earl; "and it was in order that I might carry out my project at once, that I did not instantaneously present myself at Carlton House on my return. In fact I only arrived yesterday evening, at about seven o'clock, and going in the first instance to see a friend of mine—or rather a young man who is interested in my affairs—I sent him to Grosvenor Street with a letter saying that I should not be at home until *this* evening. Ah! my dear Venetia, pardon me if I say I know your sex so well, that I felt assured my wife would at once communicate with her paramour—even supposing that she had not an appointment with him for the night——"

"Oh! what a calculation on your part!" exclaimed Venetia, in a tone of mock rebuke: "what an opinion you must indeed have of our sex! But pray go on: I am interested in these proceedings which you are relating."

"Well," continued the Earl, "at about eleven I went home. If I had found Editha, I should of course have told her that I had been enabled after all to return more speedily than I at first anticipated: but she was *not* at home—and I understood that she had gone to Lady Lechmere's. Ah! then I knew at once that I was on the right track. I accordingly proceeded thither——But public rumour has doubtless told you all the rest that occurred?"

"Yes," replied Venetia. "And now, do you not think that you have been very foolish? How can you possibly find fault with your wife——"

"Ah! my dear Venetia," exclaimed the Earl, "if you force me into explanations, I must give them. My disposition is a curious one; and rakish, profligate, dissipated though I may be, I could not endure the thought that my wife should follow in the same path. It may be unjust—it may be preposterous——"

"Well, we will not comment any more upon this part of the affair," interrupted Venetia. "But tell me—are you going to challenge Horace to a duel?"

"I must," answered the Earl of Curzon. "But I promise you, my dear Venetia, that I will fire very wide of the mark. Not that I suppose you care over much for your husband——"

"You talk of purposely missing your aim," said Venetia, hastily; "but by that very attempt you may hit him—for is it not sometimes the random or ill-directed shot that takes the fatal effect?"

"And yet I *must* challenge him," reiterated the Earl. "You know very well, my dear Venetia, how peremptory is the code of honour——"

"Honour!" echoed Venetia: and her beautiful lips writhed in superb disdain. "Now tell me, is not this thing that you call *honour* the most wretched, paltry, miserable scarecrow of a sentiment that ever was? Horace is as justified in intriguing with *your* wife as you are in intriguing with *his*, if there be any justification at all. And yet, because *you* happen to have found him and *your* wife out, you must fight a duel!"

"To be sure," exclaimed Curzon. "Suppose that *he* had found you and me out, should I not be compelled to go and fight a duel with *him?*"

"Ah! it is a wretched affair, this code of honour of your's after all!" said Venetia: then, as she started somewhat abruptly from the sofa, she said, "I think that I have a book here which exposes the folly of duelling."

Thus peaking, she advanced towards a side-table which stood in a recess of the chimney-piece; and while pretending to be in search for a book, she pulled the bell-wire unperceived by Lord Curzon.

"No—I cannot find the volume," she said: and returning to the sofa, she placed herself in the same voluptuous contact with him as before. "Now, do you not think you are acting foolishly? Tell me the truth:"—and she began to lavish upon him a perfect torrent of caresses which seemed of the tenderest as they were certainly of the most exciting nature.

She fastened her lips to his—she threw her arms around his neck—and during the intervals of the warm and fervid kisses which they thus exchanged, she breathed the tenderest expressions in his ears. Intoxicated with a sense of bliss, the Earl of Curzon forgot all about Editha—all about his contemplated law suit: he thought only of this woman of glorious beauty and of enchanting fascinations who was now placed in such close contact with him;—and yielding to the influence—the almost maddening influence—of his desires, he was on the point of snatching the last crowning bliss, when the door of the boudoir was suddenly burst open, and Lord Sackville appeared upon the threshold!

The Earl of Curzon gave vent to an ejaculation of dismay while starting from Venetia's arms as if she had suddenly changed into a serpent: then, as he beheld the scarlet glow which flamed up on the countenance of her husband, he naturally thought that it was a fiery indignation which was thus expressed. But though perhaps for the first instant there might have been such a feeling in Sackville's heart, yet it was rather with amazement that he was thus inspired—amazement mingled with a feeling of shame too, at the spectacle that now met his eyes. But almost instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, and of course penetrating the stratagem which Venetia had thus adopted, he closed the door—locked it—and advanced a few paces farther into the boudoir.

Curzon knew not what to say or what to do. He was overwhelmed with confusion, until Venetia suddenly bursting out laughing recalled him to a full sense of his position. Yes—and all in a moment the truth flashed to his mind. It was a stratagem on the part of Lady Sackville to place him and her husband precisely on the same footing towards each other! But, heavens! what an utter profligate did Venetia now seem in his eyes!—what a shameless meretricious woman had she thus rendered herself! Such were the thoughts that flashed through the mind of the Earl of Curzon all in a moment.

"I congratulate your lordship," he said, a withering irony in his accents, "upon the possession of such an amiable and excellent wife, who thus readily sacrifices herself in order to save *you* from a duel to which I now of course cannot challenge you."

"At all events, my lord," retorted Horace, his countenance again becoming scarlet, "since I know myself to be profligate and debauched, I am not base enough to go laying snares to entrap my wife—nor unjust enough to reproach her when I find that she goes astray."

"Well," said Curzon, contemptuously, "I do not think we need stand here bandying words. 'Tis quite apparent *now* that I cannot challenge you to meet me at a dozen paces: nor can you challenge me. Neither can I very well bring an action against you—nor you against me."

"It would indeed be the most ridiculous pair of law-suits," observed Horace, "that ever were brought before the cognizance of a tribunal. But how is the complicated affair to end?"

"Perhaps this fair divinity, the goddess of intrigue as well as of beauty," said Curzon, with a bow of mock solemnity towards Venetia, "will condescend to issue her instructions: for it is quite clear that her ladyship's dramatic imagination has contrived this spendid equivoque. Heavens! if it should be lost to the theatrical world, what a misfortune would it be!" added the Earl, in a tone of bitter irony.

Venetia, who had been listening with calm indifference to the observations thus made by the Earl of Curzon, now deemed it time to develop her views.

"You both stand in a strange position towards each other, it is true," she said; "and you neither appear to understand how there can possibly be an issue from the dilemma. Now, as all the world is already acquainted with the discovery of *your* intrigue, Horace, with Lady Curzon, it becomes absolutely necessary that you should fight a duel with Lord Curzon. The code of honour, as he has assured me, requires this pleasant little proceeding: or else he would be deemed and proclaimed a coward by all his friends as well as his enemies. A duel, then, there *must* be. But on the other hand, how can Lord Curzon possibly seek your life, Horace, for having dishonoured him, when he in the same manner has dishonoured you? And it will not do to tell the world that there is tit for tat in this affair. In the first place it would not suit the Earl even to have the fact made known at all, because he wishes to obtain a divorce from his wife, which he could not procure if his own conduct were made public: he would be held undeserving of the remedy. Then, in the second place, there is no need to make public the scene which has now occurred; because *you*, Horace, do not wish to expose your wife—*you* do not seek a divorce from her—*you* have no vindictive feelings to gratify. As for the Earl of Curzon, *he* of course, as a man and as a gentleman, will maintain a profound silence also relative to the scene that has just occurred. Now therefore you begin to comprehend how stands the matter between you: and yet it is most contradictory—most anomalous—most paradoxical. For the world, knowing only of *your* intrigue, Horace, with Lady Curzon, will according to the code of honour look for a duel between yourself and Lord Curzon; whereas *you*, Lord Curzon," she continued, "on the other hand, cannot possibly stand up to take my husband's life under the circumstances which have now transpired, but which are *not* to be made known to the world. Such is the contradictory position. But know ye what is to be done?"

Venetia stopped short as she asked this question. Both her husband and the Earl of Curzon gazed upon her in unfeigned surprise mingled with curiosity. The latter even forgot his rage and hate at the stratagem of which he had been made the dupe—so completely was his interest

now enchained in the part which this extraordinary woman—as extraordinary as she was beautiful—was taking in these delicate and difficult matters.

"Well, neither of you seem to be able to answer my question," she continued, after a pause of nearly a minute. "I will tell you, then, what is to be done. There must be a sham duel! Yes—a duel in which there shall be every appearance of hostile intent—in which the pistols shall be loaded with powder and ball—duly discharged—point-blank, as I believe the phrase is—and even fired a second time, if you will,—but leaving you both unscathed and unhurt after all!"

"If such a proceeding can really take place," said the Earl of Curzon, still under the influence of astonishment, "it will assuredly be the best manner to settle the present difficulty. A due homage will thereby be paid to the opinion of the world—the laws of honour will be openly satisfied—and privately no unfairness will have been committed between your lordship and me."

"I am perfectly agreeable," said Horace: "for of course, under present circumstances, I cannot wish to let you have the chance of taking my life—and I assuredly am equally repugnant to take yours."

"But respecting the action for *crim. con.*," said the Earl of Curzon, "which must precede the suit for a divorce in the House of Lords?—I have already consulted my solicitor upon the subject——"

"Ah! your lordship has not suffered the grass to grow under your feet since your return to London," exclaimed Venetia. "But since you appeal to me relative to this new question, is there not such a thing as seeking only nominal damages?—in which case Horace will of course offer no opposition to the action."

"Yes—the legal portion of the affair can be thus managed," said the Earl of Curzon. "But your ladyship has yet to tell us how this sham duel, as you call it, is to be managed."

"I chanced a few days ago," said Venetia, "to take up a book in which were recorded many curious experiments of legerdemain, sleight-of-hand, and conjuring tricks; and one of the feats described was most ingenious and interesting. It was that of a conjuror suffering a person to fire a loaded pistol at him—a pistol charged with ball——"

"But what was the ball made of?" asked Curzon, with an incredulous curl of the lip.

"It was a ball of hollow glass filled with quicksilver," answered Venetia; "and when such a bullet is held in the hand it feels of the same weight as a genuine one, the appearance of which it also has to the eye."

"Excellent!" exclaimed both Horace and Curzon, now in the same breath: for they both perceived in an instant how Venetia's idea of a sham duel could be carried out.

"Now, Horace, you can withdraw," said his wife; "and I will summon Jessica to conduct the Earl of Curzon as privately as possible out of the palace."

"In the course of the day, then," said Horace, with a cold salutation, "your lordship will send some friend with a challenge, according to the wonted formalities?"

"I shall do so, my lord," responded Curzon, likewise with a haughty reserve.

Venetia now rang the bell; and her husband at once issued from the boudoir.

"Now, my dear Curzon," said Venetia, the moment they were once more alone together, "you must not be angry at what I have done: for I was resolved to put an end to this duel—or rather to disarm it of its dangerous character. Come, tell me you are not angry; for assuredly I do not wish to quarrel with you:"—and as she spoke she lavished upon him such intoxicating caresses that he rapidly experienced a thaw in the ill-humour which he had conceived against her. "I forgive you for the harsh and biting words you used just now towards me," she added; "and therefore——"

"Well, dearest Venetia," said Curzon, "you must admit that the stratagem of which you made me the dupe was enough to irritate me."

"Hush! no more of all this," she said, gaily and archly placing her hand upon his mouth. "Now sit down once more, and tell me all that occurred at Geneva."

At this moment a knock was heard at the door, and Venetia ordered Jessica, from whom the summons came, to return in half-an-hour—for she had only rung the bell in the presence of her husband to make him believe that Curzon was at once to take his departure and that she had no private business with him.

The Earl accordingly proceeded to give Venetia an account of just as much as it suited him to relate concerning his proceedings at Geneva. He did not mention the name of Malpas; and she did not choose to mention it either. In fact her only object was now to ascertain the precise position in which affairs seemed to be in the household of the Princess of Wales; and if she showed herself thus affable, condescending, and kind towards the Earl of Curzon, it was merely because she deemed it prudent to conciliate a man who was acquainted with so many of her secrets.

At the expiration of the half-hour Jessica returned to the boudoir; and Curzon was then stealthily conducted from the palace.

Venetia now remained alone—alone to ponder upon all that had taken place, and to plunge into those meditations which the development of her career, with all its varied incidents, was so well calculated to engender. Was not all sense of virtue now lost within her soul?—had she not become shameless in her depravities and brazen in her profligacies? Yes: nor did she attempt to conceal this fact from herself! On the contrary, she was resolved that so far as the power of her beauty and the witchery of her fascinations could serve her purposes of ambition or of intrigue—of amorous gallantry or of subtle design—she would never hesitate to render those means available.

CHAPTER CXLVIII.

THE GATHERING STORM.

At about the same hour that the scene which we have just related was taking place at Carlton House, another of a very different character, but of equal interest in the development of our tale, was occurring in the City.

Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker, was seated in his private office, examining the letters which had arrived by the morning's post. His countenance was haggard and careworn: there was an occasional quivering of the lip which denoted an inward excitement of no ordinary degree, and as he opened letter after letter, his hands trembled with nervous agitation. Ever and anon he gave a kind of convulsive start, as if suddenly becoming aware of the moral weakness to which he was thus yielding and the physical derangement that was accompanying it; and then he would compress his lips and clench his fists violently, and even stamp his foot upon the carpet, as he said to himself, "This is ridiculous! this is childish! Things cannot be so bad as my fears pourtray them."

But things *were* bad though, and very bad too, with Mr. Emmerson the bill-broker. Several unfortunate speculations had within the last few months crippled his resources; and the enormous drains which his amour with Lady Curzon made upon his purse, tended still farther to hamper him. Concurrently with these progressive sources of ruin, the extravagances of his family had increased at Clapham; and in the endeavour to outshine all their neighbours, his wife and daughter had set no bounds to their profusion. But, as Emmerson day by day had seen his own affairs becoming more involved and his family's expenditure growing more lavish, a feeling of pride mingled with alarm had prevented him from communicating to his wife the state of his finances and the necessity that existed for economy. Yes—pride, because he could not bring himself to give utterance to the humiliating words which should enforce the necessity of retrenchment—and alarm, because he felt that if he were to show any outward sign of his embarrassments, all his creditors would become clamorous at once, his credit would be stopped, and his destruction accelerated. Thus, the extravagances at home had gone on increasing while his means of supporting them were diminishing; and although his wife and daughter observed at times that he became thoughtful and sombre—and though they even detected an expression of perfect agony occasionally sweeping over his countenance—yet they quieted their own fears with the thought that too close an application to business was the cause of Emmerson's altering looks; and not for a moment did they choose to suspect that any trouble was being introduced into his finances.

In addition to the above-mentioned causes of pecuniary embarrassment, Emmerson had recently stood an expensive contest for the aldermanic gown of one of the City Wards. Here again did the pride of a man who was so strong in oppressing all whom his usurious practices brought within his scope, become his weakness; and though at the very first moment when a deputation of his friends waited upon him and asked him to stand as a candidate, he was frightened at the enormous expense into which it would lead him, he nevertheless had not the courage to breathe the word "*no*." The canvass therefore took place; and judging by the promises received, Emmerson's success appeared certain. But when the day of election came, many of those who had pledged themselves to support him, stopped away; while others actually went to the polling place and recorded their votes against him! Vain had been all his expenditure to ensure his election—equally vain and futile had proved his frothy vapourings relative to "our blessed Constitution" and "glorious laws:" it was evident that some mysterious agency had been at work to undermine him, and that to such dark and insidious manœuverings was his defeat to be attributed.

While still smarting under the galling sense of a failure which, prominent as he had made himself as a Common Councilman, was absolutely ignominious, Emmerson began to observe that some of his most influential City friends seemed less cordial than they were wont to be. At first he thought that this was mere fancy on his part: but he soon received such signal proofs to the contrary, that he was compelled to confess to himself that his character was waning and his credit diminishing. Fresh evidences of these facts promptly developed themselves. His bankers wrote a peremptory letter to remind him that he had latterly been overdrawing his account and paying but little money in: two or three capitalists, of whom he had for years past been enabled to obtain any sums he required, were full of excuses when he now demanded their aid. One had "locked up all his funds"—another had "decided upon turning his floating capital into other channels"—and a third "could not possibly oblige Mr. Emmerson on the present occasion." But this was not all. Some of his best clients—well-to-do tradesmen who occasionally wanted the accommodation of a few thousands or hundreds, and who did not mind paying handsomely for the loan thereof for a short time—found out some other bill-broker who charged a lesser interest, and thus Emmerson's business was rapidly falling off.

Still these were not all the evils and misfortunes that were closing in around him. During the last week or two, reports had been privately whispered both in the City and at Clapham that his affairs were embarrassed beyond all remedy. Bills then came pouring in upon him; and he found, to his horror and dismay, that large accounts for upholstery, jewellery, wine, millinery, and so forth, for which he had given his wife the money, remained unliquidated, she having lavished the funds in other ways. That his approaching downfall was rumoured, soon reached his ears by several disagreeable means. His wife had a quarrel with a female servant whom she threatened to discharge; whereupon the woman blazed forth in a fury of invective and taunt, declaring that pride would have a fall and that everybody knew the end of all this pomp and ostentation was at hand! Then Mrs. Emmerson's eyes were suddenly opened to the truth; and she *charged* her husband with his financial embarrassment—as if it constituted a positive crime of which he had been guilty towards her! As a matter of course he turned upon her with virulent reproaches for her extravagance; and thus a terrible scene took place, of which all the servants were listeners. On going into the City on that occasion, Emmerson found that all persons who had any claims upon him there, were getting very pressing for payment; and in the course of a few days they grew absolutely clamorous, acting and speaking as if they were secretly urged on by somebody who was giving them to understand that unless they became thus importunate it was very likely they would never be paid at all.

Such was now the position of Emmerson's affairs:

and the reader will not therefore be surprised at finding him in such a nervous, excited, and agitated state as we have described at the opening of the present chapter. Indeed, it was quite clear that matters were coming to a crisis; and although for a few moments he had hugged the belief that "things were not so bad as they seemed," the letters which he was now opening speedily convinced him that things could not possibly be worse. Some of these letters insisted upon prompt settlement of accounts already delivered: others were from solicitors giving notice of actions in cases where many fruitless applications for payment had been made; other letters, again, contained refusals —some speciously apologetic, others laconically blunt—in answer to requests made by Emmerson for loans from former City friends: and other letters conveyed the intimation of the failure of speculations in which he had embarked, and the inability of three or four large debtors to pay him what they owed. These circumstances were of themselves sufficient to drive even a stronger-minded man than Emmerson to utter desperation. But still they did not constitute the whole sum of the crushing calamities and goading adversities that were hemming him in around. There was yet *one* other circumstance that cut him to the very soul: for the rumour of what was termed "the *faux pas* in high life," relative to the Countess of Curzon and Lord Sackville, had already reached the City, and thus made Emmerson aware that he had been duped and deluded by a fashionable courtezan who had wheedled large sums out of him under the semblance of affection, while she was all the time intriguing with her patrician paramour!

Bitterly, bitterly did Emmerson curse his folly now that the infatuation had passed away: deeply, deeply did he deplore his miserable stupidity in yielding himself up so completely to the Circean wiles and Syren blandishments of that titled profligate who had thus taken so large a share in accomplishing his ruin.

Half-maddened, then, was Emmerson as he sat at noon in his own private office, looking over his letters and obtaining a deeper insight into his perplexities as he advanced step by step down the precipice which that correspondence thus developed to his views. And while all these fearful things were forced upon his contemplation, through the whole cloud of miseries penetrated the thought of his astounding folly in respect to Lady Curzon. And how humiliated—how profoundly humiliated—did he now feel when he reflected that the haughty peeress, so far from ever loving *him*—the plebeian money-grubber—had been making a tool and an instrument of him the whole time; and that if she had encouraged him to quit the dingy regions of the City in order to enter the paradise of West End fashion, the portals of which had unfolded their wings at her magic touch to give him admission, it was only because the enchantress had her own selfish purposes to serve! For he felt—full keenly felt—that those golden gates of high life's elysium would now be as sternly and mercilessly closed against him as the doors of a workhouse are to a pauper who has no settlement in the parish: and he almost gnashed his teeth with rage as he reflected that, although he had paid thousands of pounds for the privilege of basking in the sun-light of patrician beauty and mingling with the other gilded insects that flitted about in the roseate floods of luxury, yet that he was only a plebeian intruder and vulgar interloper after all!

Such was Emerson's state of mind on the day of which we are now writing. Having gone through all his correspondence—as a man traverses a district where nature presents naught save features of horror, gloom, and danger, unrelieved by a single spot of refreshing verdure or floral colouring—he started from his seat and began pacing the room with rapid but uneven steps.

What was he to do? Should he become bankrupt—pass through the ordeal of that tribunal so humbling to commercial pride, so ruinous to the credit of the money-grubber—and then seek to begin the world anew? Or should he gather together such wrecks of his late immense resources as he could possibly accumulate, and fly to Canada, or some part of the world where under another name he might enter upon a fresh career? This latter idea was the one that pleased him best. He was so disgusted with the extravagances of his wife and daughter—forgetting that he himself had first encouraged them in a lavish expenditure, and then had not courage to check it when it exceeded all reasonable bounds—that he resolved to leave them behind him to shift for themselves. Heartless, selfish, and cruel was this man, even at the very moment when it was most natural that he should seek the solace and the sympathy of those whom he thus coldly and deliberately determined on abandoning for ever!

As a matter of course, Emmerson was too cautious to confide to any one his intention of departing from the country. But still he could not make all the necessary preparations himself. There were certain little sums of money owing to him in different quarters, and most of which might be obtained upon application; but he could not go round collecting them himself—and indeed it was absolutely necessary that this duty should be performed by Varian.

"But will he suspect anything?" asked Emmerson of himself, suddenly stopping short in the midst of his agitated walk as the necessity of employing Theodore in the business thus struck him. "No—I do not think that he will suspect! Ever since he returned to me, he has been docile, meek, and obliging: he has done everything he could to regain my confidence; and it is clear from a few words which he has occasionally let drop, that he himself does not imagine my affairs to be very seriously embarrassed. I do believe he is a good, kind-hearted, faithful creature after all; and that I treated him cruelly and harshly when some months ago I sent him to Newgate. Well, then, it is not likely he will suspect anything: and if he do, he would not betray me. No—I might almost make him a confidant of my intentions: and yet it were better that I should not trust him farther than is necessary. But at all events, I will now speak to him and watch his countenance narrowly."

Having thus mused, Mr. Emmerson composed his features as well as he was able—took a glass of wine from one of the sample-bottles which he invariably kept in his office—and then summoned Theodore Varian to his presence. The young man entered with an air so perfectly frank and open, and at the same time so respectful, that the bill-broker perceived therein the corroboration of all the reflections he had just been making with regard to him; and re-seating himself at the table, he said, "Shut the door, Varian. I wish to speak to you for a few minutes."

Theodore did as he was desired; and as he approached the table, he said, "Two or three persons came inquiring for you just now, sir; but as I knew you were occupied with your letters, I said you were not in at the moment."

"Ah!" ejaculated Emmerson: "then I suppose you knew they were persons whom I did not wish to see?"—and he fixed his eyes steadfastly upon Theodore's countenance.

"I did certainly entertain that impression, sir," replied Theodore, totally unabashed and unmoved—indeed not appearing to observe that his master's eyes were settled upon him; "because the persons came for payment of their accounts. But as I know that your resources are all locked up for the moment in your numerous speculations, I took it upon myself to give the answer which I have mentioned."

"And you have not only done well, but also reasoned correctly," said Emmerson, with an approving smile. "In fact, Theodore, you have been long enough in my office and are well enough acquainted with the commercial world, to know that there are times and seasons when even the richest and the most prosperous merchants, traders, and speculators are temporarily embarrassed. Such is the case with me at the present moment. I have thousands locked up in ventures which are really no ventures at all, because they are safe as the Bank of England itself: and moreover, certain remittances which I have been expecting from the colonies, have not yet arrived. The consequence is, that I am somewhat hampered for the present——"

"All this is precisely what I knew, sir," remarked Varian, with every appearance of the most genuine sincerity: "for I felt convinced that a

gentleman of your intelligence and business-habits could not be involved in serious difficulties."

"Of course not!—the idea would be ridiculous indeed!" exclaimed Emmerson, laughing—but it was a hollow and unnatural laugh, the laugh of desperation! "But I tell you what we had better do, Mr. Varian," he almost immediately continued: "you shall go round collecting the small sums that are due, and I will get in the large amounts. I think in the course of the day we may manage to do this; and then we shall be able to make up our books so as to see correctly how matters stand and settle the liabilities that are most pressing. And then," added Emmerson, assuming an air of proud assurance, which heaven knows he did not feel in his heart, "I shall get a loan of twenty or thirty thousand from my bankers to answer my purposes until other monies begin to flow in again."

"If you will give me a list, sir, of the persons who owe small sums, I will go round at once," said Varian.

"Here is a list which I have already made out," said Emmerson: and he handed his clerk a piece of paper.

Theodore then sallied forth, inwardly chuckling at the thought that the hour of his vengeance was approaching: for he had not the slightest difficulty in penetrating the design of his master. On the contrary—he saw plainly enough that Emmerson was endeavouring to "make up a purse" wherewith to flee from the country; and he resolved to apply the spark to the train of combustibles that were now ready to explode around him.

Mr. Emmerson also sallied forth—but it was *not*, as he had alleged, to collect any large sums. He wished to heaven that there were any such sums which he was able to collect at all! But he went forth to keep up appearances with Varian, and likewise to avoid the duns who were calling every quarter of an hour at his office. In his desperation, however, he resolved as a last resource to call upon two or three wealthy friends with whom he had been accustomed to have large transactions, but whom he now found inaccessible to his demands and his representations. Vainly did he assure them that "there was a most excellent opportunity of investing a few thousands at twenty *per cent.*, if they liked to go shares with him in the enterprise and advance a part of the capital." They refused him in a manner which as plainly as possible told him that they would not entrust their funds in his hands; and though he endeavoured to ride the high horse, he nevertheless went forth from their counting-houses crest-fallen and downcast.

He returned to his office at about four o'clock, and found that Varian had already come back. Yes—the young man had been there alone for the last half-hour, having sent the boy out upon some pretence: and during this half-hour he had procured from Emmerson's desk the document which he had promised to deliver into the hands of the Earl of Curzon. But at the moment when Emmerson returned, Theodore was seated at his usual place in the front office, attending to his business with a placid and calm demeanour, as if nothing unusual had happened and nothing of an exciting character was going on.

"Well, what luck?" inquired Emmerson, affecting an air of indifference, though all his plans depended upon Varian's answer.

"I have succeeded, sir, in every quarter," replied Theodore, "and have collected the several items upon this list. Here are three hundred and seventy pounds in all."

"Good!" exclaimed Emmerson, scarcely able to conceal his joy: and he felt at the moment that even in the midst of the most desperate circumstances, there may be yet a gleam of hope and a source of cheerfulness.

Having counted the money, he placed it in his pocket, observing with an apparent off-hand manner "that he himself had been very lucky and had collected a few thousands." He then entered his inner office—sate down—and began to reflect profoundly upon an idea which within the last hour or two had been gradually expanding itself as it were in his mind.

And what was the subject of his thoughts—that subject which had now become all-absorbing and all-engrossing as he sate with his elbows resting upon the table and his hands supporting his head? He had made up his mind to fly from England; and he had procured the means of doing so. In a few hours he meant to be off. In a word, he had resolved upon bidding farewell to England for ever. Then why depart with barely four hundred pounds in his pocket? What a beggarly amount—what a wretched sum—for a man who had been accustomed to command the use of thousands! Could he not by some means treble or quadruple the sum which he had in his possession? Yes—there *was* a method which he might adopt; and this was by means of a forgery!

Such was the idea on which Emmerson now pondered. He examined the matter in all its bearings—weighed its chances of success—calculated all the risks of discovery. Well does the proverb say that "the man who deliberates is lost." Whenever an evil idea enters the head, if the individual have not the courage to seize it by the neck at once as he would a snake that turned to bite him, he is led by an invisible fascination to look at it in the face—examine it—reflect upon it—and suffer it to haunt him until it becomes his master at last. So was it with Emmerson: and having thus yielded to the influence of his iniquitous promptings, he proceeded with careful deliberation to execute the crime.

A bill of exchange, payable at twenty-one days after date, was duly drawn up by his experienced hand; and across it he forged the names of a large trading firm with whom he had had many previous transactions and whose respectability was sufficient to render the bill easy of negotiation. It was for the amount of fifteen hundred guineas, and looked altogether in Emmerson's estimation as genuine a document as ever was presented for discount. But nevertheless, the moment he had put the finishing stroke to the forgery, he felt a strange sensation pass over him, as if his position had changed all in a moment, and bad as it was before had now become ten thousand times worse. Five minutes back, and it was merely the Bankruptcy Court and the King's Bench that threatened him: *now* he had laid himself open to the Old Bailey and Newgate! Aye, and this was not all—for with the mere fact of tracing those few black lines upon a slip of paper, the still blacker spars of the gibbet had suddenly started up before his view!

But Emmerson was not the man to be deterred by mere imaginary terrors from his purpose. He

was in that condition which is most friendly to the designs of Satan—most favourable to the temptations in which the Evil One seeks to ensnare frail humanity. Accordingly, Emmerson put the bill into his pocket-book; and issuing forth, paused in the front office to say, "Well, Mr. Varian, it is time to lock up. Be here early in the morning, as we shall then go over the books together."

With these words the bill-broker took his departure, hugging the idea that his intention was totally unsuspected by his clerk: but had he seen the strange expression which passed over Varian's countenance the instant the door closed behind him, he would not have felt so happy nor so confident in the course which he was pursuing.

Proceeding straight to his bankers, he entered the spacious establishment—one of those which are said to render Lombard Street the richest in the world. Without pausing at the counter, he passed straight on to the private parlour; and there, in an off-hand manner and with his usual tone of confidence, he handed the bill to one of the partners, requesting that it might be discounted. The demand was promptly complied with: Emmerson received the money, and sallied forth from the bank. He then returned to his office, which Theodore Varian had in the meantime quitted—but only to keep watch upon his master and dog his movements.

Procuring the key from the housekeeper who had charge of the chambers, Emmerson was enabled to penetrate into the offices; and shutting himself up in his private room, he went carefully over his papers—destroying a great number, and retaining a few which he believed to be necessary or useful for his future purposes. It did not strike him that Editha's letter had been abstracted: now that so many grave and important matters pressed upon his attention, he did not even recollect that he had placed any one of her letters in his writing-desk.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening when Emmerson issued forth again from his chambers,—thinking to himself that he was bidding them farewell for ever. At that moment he experienced a sad and painful tightening at the heart. Not that he thought of the wife and daughter whom he had resolved to leave behind him and abandon to poverty and all its attendant evils:—no, it was of lost position that he thought so regretfully—and he inwardly cursed himself for having allowed extravagance and folly thus to hurl him from the pedestal of that happiness which, according to the fashion of his own mind, he had at one time created.

Entering a hackney-coach near the Mansion House, he ordered the driver to take him to the *Bull and Mouth*, Piccadilly. That establishment was at the time of which we are writing, and for many years afterwards—until the Genius of Steam wove its web of railways over the surface of the land—the great central point whence started innumerable coaches for all parts of England. Thither it was that Mr. Emmerson now repaired: and thither also was he closely followed by Theodore Varian.

But the young man was not now alone: he had two persons with him—none others indeed, than Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom.

On arriving at the *Bull and Mouth*, Mr. Emmerson alighted—dismissed the hackney-coach—entered the office—and was making some inquiries at the counter relative to the stages to Liverpool, when he felt a hand suddenly laid upon his shoulder. He started as if it were the touch of Death—started as if the invisible fingers of the Destroyer had suddenly sent an ice-chill penetrating through his frame: and turning quickly round, he beheld himself face to face with Theodore Varian.

Not a word did he utter: for he saw in a moment that he was lost. The thunder-clap of doom sounded as it were upon his ear; and he knew that he was betrayed as indubitably as if the young man had already proclaimed the fact from his lips! Besides, those ominous countenances that peered over Varian's shoulders—Emmerson knew them well: for Mr. Moses Ikey and his man Tom had been the instruments of many and many a bitter persecution waged by the bill-broker against poor wretches who were unable to meet his usurious demands!

"You thought to escape?" said Varian, in a low hoarse tone, full of concentrated passion, and fixing a look of inexorable bitterness upon the fallen man: "but you are mistaken!"

"Stand aside, sir," exclaimed Emmerson, now suddenly recovering the faculty of speech as a ray of hope flashed upon his mind: for in the first place it was evident that the forgery had not been discovered, or else they would be criminal and not civil officers who had come to arrest him; and in the second place, if the writ held by Mr. Ikey was for a sum which Emmerson could pay, as he had nearly two thousand pounds about his person, he might yet get clear off in spite of Theodore Varian. "Now, Mr. Ikey," he said, dawing the Jew aside and speaking in a low tone, so as not to be overheard by the clerks and other persons transacting business in the coach-office,—"what claim have you against me?"

"Three thousand four hundred," Theodore hastened to observe, his voice sounding ominous as that of doom over Emmerson's shoulder. "I persuaded your largest creditor to do it: and if you can pay that amount, then I am very much mistaken."

"Tree tousand four hundred guinish ish de sum," said Mr. Ikey, corroborating Theodore's statement; "and my expenshes ish a mere trifle, Mishter Emmershon. You know as well as mosht men what ish de expenshes in dese matters:"—and Mr. Ikey gave a coarse familiar grin. "But come, let's step into de public-housh closh by, and talk it over."

"It is of no use," interjected Theodore, sternly. "Let him pay the money, Mr. Ikey, or go to prison. You know that I represent the creditor in this instance."

"Dish de truth wot he say, Mishter Emmershon," observed the sheriff's officer, in an ominous undertone, as much as to imply that he could show no mercy even if he were inclined.

Pale and trembling, the wretched Emmerson was utterly unable to conceal the horrible alarms that were now torturing him: for he saw that if he were plunged into a debtor's prison, it would only be with the certainty of removal in a short time to Newgate, when the forgery should be discovered. But the very desperation of his case suddenly inspired him with a last hope; and in a quick anxious voice, he

said to the Jew, "Mr. Ikey, you have known me for many, many years—you have had a great deal of money through the business I have put in your way—and you will now take my word that I will call upon you to-morrow——"

"'Tish impossible, Mishter Emmershon," interrupted Ikey. "My orders ish poshitive. Tom, keep de door."

"All right," growled the bailiff's follower, planting himself on the threshold.

"You will take fifteen or sixteen hundred guineas as a guarantee of my good intentions," said Emmerson, actually writhing with the anguish of his thoughts.

But the sheriff's officer shook his head; and Emmerson felt a cold perspiration burst forth all over him. The condition of the wretched man was indeed most deplorable; and visibly did his looks grow so haggard, even as he stood there in that public office, that in the space of three or four minutes twenty years seemed to have been added to his life!

As a last resource he turned towards Varian; and in a manner so humbled and with accents so full of pitiable entreaty that he now indeed appeared a spectacle well calculated to provoke contempt, he said, "Theodore, I forgave *you*—cannot you forgive *me?* For God's sake, have mercy upon me! If you say the word, I feel convinced that this Jew will take what I have to offer and let me go. You have declared that you are empowered by the creditor to do the best for his interests——"

"Viper!" was the low but bitter—Oh! fearfully bitter and venomously malignant ejaculation which suddenly hissed as it were from Theodore's lips and struck the wretched Emmerson dumb at once.

To be brief, the bill-broker, with despair in his heart and frenzy in his brain, was forced to surrender himself into the keeping of Mr. Moses Ikey; and in half-an-hour he found himself a prisoner in that very same spunging-house to which he had in his time sent so many, many victims of his usury.

CHAPTER CXLIX.

THE SHAM DUEL.

It was soon after six o'clock on the following morning, that a carriage and pair entered upon Wormwood Scrubs,—in those times, and even down to the latest days, a famous resort for duellists. It is at no great distance from London, but is nevertheless sufficiently retired and lonely for the purpose to which it seems specially appropriated; and when viewed at that gray hour of the morning, the scene presented an aspect more than usually savage and desolate.

Forth from the carriage descended the redoubtable Tash, with a pistol-case under his arm, and with an air of such swaggering importance that it seemed as if he had come out into the suburbs because London itself was too confined to hold him. He was followed by Lord Sackville and Dr. Thurston; and leaving the carriage, they advanced to some distance, where they were met by Lord Curzon, the Hon. George Macnamara, and Dr. Copperas.

Curzon and Sackville appeared to take no notice of each other; but Captain Tash at once walked up to Macnamara, and seizing him by the hand, shook it so heartily that the gentleman on whom he thus bestowed this mark of his cordiality, actually writhed in the Captain's iron grasp.

"Glad to see you this morning, my dear fellow!" said Tash. "You and I have met before at drinking bouts, and in one or two street rows, but never on so agreeable an occasion as the present: and my only regret is that we are not the principals instead of the seconds."

"Captain Tash," said the Hon. George Macnamara, somewhat coldly, "you must be well aware that we have no time to waste in idle comments. Come, let us measure the ground, load the pistols, and get over this business as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible!" vociferated Captain Tash, looking both amazed and indignant: "you may as well tell me when I have paid my money at the door of the theatre, that the performances are to be hurried over with the most indecent haste: or that if I am sitting down to a good dinner, I must not detain the dishes above a minute. By all daggers and wounds! I, Rolando Tash, protest against such a doctrine!"

"Well, well, Captain," said Macnamara; "you and I will not dispute."

"Egad! but I think that it is most likely we shall," retorted the gallant officer. "The fact is, I have not shot a man for the last six or seven years; and I think it is high time I should do so, just to keep my hand in."

"Be pleased to understand, Captain Tash," said Macnamara, with mingled hauteur and contempt, "that I am no coward, but at the same time I am not to be bullied into a duel with any one."

"Bullied!" roared Tash, his voice now sounding half across the scene of action, and his countenance becoming as red as the comb of a turkey cock: "what do you mean, sir?"

But here Horace at once interfered, peremptorily whispering to the Captain that if he did not command his temper the post of "second" should be withdrawn from him: whereupon the gallant officer, though grumbling somewhat at what he called "the liberty of the subject being interfered with, when merely seeking to blow another's brains out," consented to proceed to the business of the meeting without farther comment or noise.

Meanwhile Dr. Copperas and Dr. Thurston had stepped up to each other—shaken hands—and exchanged their usual compliments in that fashion which constitutes the "*aside*" of the stage: namely, appearing to say something which is not meant to be overheard, but in reality bawling it out loud enough to make every word audible to all present.

"My dear Dr. Copperas," said Thurston, "who would have thought of meeting you here this morning and under such circumstances? But I must say that in the midst of the gloom which this pending duel naturally throws around us, nothing could give *me* greater satisfaction than to find that *you* are present on the occasion: for I am well aware that no member of the faculty has devoted more attention to wounds by bullets than yourself."

"Unless, my dear Dr. Thurston," said Dr. Copperas, "it is yourself. Indeed, as I said in

the *Medical Reformer* last week, there is no follower of Esculapius living who has the same experience as you in a certain class of hurts and injuries."

"Why, my dear Dr. Copperas," said Dr. Thurston, "it was the very same opinion that I passed upon you, at the very same time too, in the *Scalpel*."

And as they thus spoke, the two physicians threw a sidelong glance towards the duellists and the seconds, to observe whether their dialogue produced any effect upon those noblemen and gentlemen.

Meantime Captain Tash and the Hon. Mr. Macnamara were getting on more comfortably together than at first. Each had a pistol-case containing a pair of the murderous weapons—a flask of gunpowder—and several bullets: and they proceeded to load in each other's presence.

"These are Sackville's pistols," said Tash; "and a very excellent pair they seem to be. I could wing a fellow at twenty paces with them."

"And these pistols are mine," observed Macnamara. "Curzon did not possess a pair of duelling pistols——"

"Neither would Sackville have had these," remarked the gallant officer, "unless I had assured him some weeks ago that it was highly necessary for a finished gentleman—we put the *nobleman* out of the question in this sense—to have a pair of such harkers as these. Thunder and wounds! I only wish I had the handling of them just now. I could riddle my opponent through and through; and I feel just in the humour to do it, too," added Tash, again looking grimly upon Macnamara, as if he thought it a very great shame, amounting almost to an insult, that this gentleman did not at once take the hint and offer to fight him.

"These are not my bullets, though," said Macnamara, without heeding the Captain's last observation. "Curzon gave them to me just now. Did you ever see bullets so perfectly round and so smooth? They are the prettiest little things I ever beheld in all my life."

"So they are," observed Tash; "and it really makes one envy the lucky dog that is to be riddled with such little darlings. But mine, you perceive, are equally good. I wonder where the deuce Sackville got these splendid bullets from. Like your's, they are as round as possible, and as smooth as an egg. Really it must be quite delicious to receive one's knock-me-down blow from such elegant little bullets!"—and this time the Captain threw a glance of mingled entreaty and reproach upon the Hon. George Macnamara, as much as to say that if the idea of being killed with such pretty bullets did not render him disposed to fight, nothing would.

"Now, are you ready?" asked the latter, still paying no heed to Captain Tash's nonsense.

The ground was measured—Curzon and Sackville were placed at an interval of twelve paces—and while Captain Tash handed a weapon to his principal, Macnamara performed the same kind act towards the other. Dr. Copperas and Dr. Thurston remained standing at some distance, gazing with professional *sang-froid* upon the duellists. The signal for firing was given by the dropping of Captain Tash's handkerchief; and then, as the pistols exploded, Dr. Copperas suddenly started convulsively, feeling himself all over to ascertain whether one of the bullets might not have diverged and accidentally hit him—while Dr. Thurston, who was braver than his companion, flung a quick glance towards Curzon and Sackville. But he seemed horribly disgusted on observing that neither of them had fallen: for the truth was, that he rather wanted at least one of them, if not both, to be winged or lamed, so that additional *eclat* might be given to the duel in the newspapers, the effect of which would be a proportionate puff for himself and Dr. Copperas.

But thanks to Venetia's forethought, no blood was destined to be shed on the present occasion. The bullets which had been used, and which had attracted so much admiration on the part of Mr. Macnamara and Captain Tash, were indeed nothing but thin glass globes filled with quicksilver, and made by a glass-blower to the order of Mr. Plumpstead, the Sackvilles' butler, who had procured the same on the previous evening. But of course Lord Sackville and Lord Curzon looked as grave and solemn as if it were really a matter of life and death between them; while Macnamara and Tash naturally supposed that everything was fair and proper, as *they* had not been let into the secret of the sham bullets.

Now, as it was the Earl of Curzon who, being ostensibly the aggrieved party, had challenged Lord Sackville, it was for the former to declare whether he was satisfied by the shots that had been exchanged; and to the ineffable disgust of Captain Tash, Mr. Macnamara said on the part of his principal, "Lord Curzon has no desire that this should go any farther. He now reserves his wrongs for the consideration of that tribunal to which as a matter of course he will appeal."

Captain Tash was too conversant with the laws of duelling to persist in compelling the principals to continue hostilities: but "he did not see the slightest reason why himself and Macnamara should not have a round or two with each other, just by way of ball-practice." Such indeed was the proposal that he made with all the coolness in the world, and in those very words.

"Since the Captain," said Macnamara, coldly, "is so anxious that I should put a bullet through his head, I must really gratify him in order to get rid of his importunity."

"Not so!" exclaimed Lord Curzon, flinging a glance of profound contempt upon Captain Tash: "for in order that there should be a duel there must be seconds—and I for one shall refuse to act in a case where no true and genuine cause of dispute has arisen."

"And I also shall refuse to serve as a second," said Horace. "Come, Tash, no one doubts your courage, though every one does your prudence. Put up the pistols and let us be gone."

"By heaven! I wish I had not left Robin at home," said the Captain, terribly put out at the idea of having nobody to fight with. "He should exchange shots with me, I swear! It is not once out of a hundred times that I stir out unattended by my man Friday, and now on the very occasion when he is so much wanted, he is not here. But I have it!" he suddenly exclaimed, his countenance brightening up; then taking off his big bell-shaped hat, and advancing in the politest manner

possible up to the two doctors, he said, with corresponding urbanity of tone, "Gentlemen, which of you would like to exchange a shot or two on the present very suitable occasion?"

"Permit me, my good sir," said Dr. Copperas, looking very hard at the Captain: and without any farther ceremony he began feeling the valiant officer's pulse—a proceeding which so astonished our friend Tash, that he stood transfixed for upwards of a minute, gazing in speechless astonishment upon the learned member of the faculty.

"Well?" said Dr. Thurston, inquiringly, as he watched the proceedings of his colleague.

"Quick and feverish pulse," said Dr. Copperas: then looking with ominous intentness into the Captain's face, he said, "Go home, sir—get your hair cut close—put a blister behind your ears—avoid all alcoholic drink—keep yourself very quiet indeed—and don't eat too much meat—nor let *that* be under-done, for you are assuredly of a sanguineous temperament, and I may indeed say, of sanguinary disposition."

Captain Tash was so astounded at this long and not altogether intelligible harangue, that he stood rooted to the spot for nearly a minute: then turning suddenly upon his heel, he muttered to himself, "These fellows understand nothing but boluses and black draughts, and know no more of the laws of honour than I do of the Chinese language."

But here we may close our description of this mock duel—pausing only to observe that the two parties returned to town in their respective vehicles, neither the seconds nor the physicians having entertained the slightest suspicion that a conjuror's trick had suggested the idea for the bullets which were used upon the occasion.

And now, as Captain Tash had predicted, Horace Sackville indeed became the lion of the day. His name was in everybody's mouth: that is to say, in all the fashionable quarters of the metropolis. Envied and courted as he had been before, his popularity among a certain class increased a thousandfold. "Oh that naughty Sackville!—that dear delightful wicked Horace—that dangerous duck of a man!"—and other expressions of a similar character were heard in all the drawing-rooms at the West End. That Venetia should take no possible notice of the matter, but appear as if she were not even acquainted with her husband's "naughty doings" at all, was quite consistent with the aristocratic and fashionable idea in such matters. But there was not a titled demirep, nor a patrician courtezan who did not affect to speak with the most contemptuous pity of the disgraced and lost Countess of Curzon: so that while Horace *the seducer* was everywhere caressed and flattered, Editha *the seduced* was everywhere spoken of with an ironical commiseration.

"Poor creature!" said the demireps and scandal-mongers, "she is done for now. But it is just what was to be expected, considering the family she belongs to."

CHAPTER CL.

THE SECOND JOURNEY ON THE CONTINENT.

The reader has doubtless ere this begun to experience some surprise that we have so long appeared to lose sight of Jocelyn Loftus: but we now propose to turn our attention to that excellent and high-souled young man.

It will be recollected that when last we saw him it was in London, whither he had proceeded from Canterbury in obedience to a letter privately written to him by the Princess Sophia. It was on that occasion also that he had attended the private theatricals at Carlton House, and that he had experienced such strange feelings on beholding Lady Sackville upon the mimic stage. Nor less will it be remembered that the interview which he succeeded in obtaining with the Prince Regent, terminated only in inspiring him with loathing and disgust for the royal voluptuary. Indeed, so convinced was he of the unmitigated profligacy and dissoluteness of the Prince, that he felt persuaded it would be altogether useless to intercede with such a man on behalf of his injured wife. Therefore was it that Jocelyn, after having written a letter to Venetia and after a second interview with the Princess Sophia, returned to Canterbury.

But, as a matter of course his presence at the private theatricals had been duly reported to Mrs. Owen at Richmond and to the Queen at Windsor; and as it was believed from the fact of his having sought an audience of the Prince that he was still interesting himself in the affairs of the Princess of Wales, the conspirators had immediately resolved to place a spy upon his actions. Thus was it that on his return to Canterbury he was followed by a trustworthy agent of those conspirators.

We must here observe that at his second interview with the Princess Sophia he had obtained from her Royal Highness a letter of introduction and recommendation to the Princess of Wales: and provided with this credential, he resolved to put his already well-considered scheme into execution—namely, to set out on another journey to seek the injured wife of the Regent. As a matter of course he dared not pass through France; and he had to choose between two distinct routes in order to reach Italy where the Princess was at that time—for it was the month of December to which we are now for a brief space referring. In the first place Jocelyn might proceed through Belgium, along the Rhine to Switzerland, and thence into Italy: or in the second place, he might embark on board some vessel bound for the Mediterranean and thus land on the Italian coast. But in consequence of the inclemency of the wintry season and the probable delay that might arise from adverse winds, he renounced the latter project in favour of the former one; and to this course he was the more inclined by the gentle persuasion of the charming Louisa, who shuddered at the thought of his encountering the perils of the sea. But we should observe that although the beautiful maiden thus found herself so soon compelled to separate from her lover again—and though she was not without misgivings that he might become exposed to fresh dangers—yet she did not strive to dissuade him from his generous purpose, because she experienced the deepest sympathy and

the kindest commiseration in respect to the persecuted Princess of Wales.

Therefore, after a very short sojourn at Canterbury, Jocelyn Loftus set out again for the Continent, —little suspecting that he was now closely watched by the spy whom the conspirators had set to dog his movements. Traversing Belgium, he entered the Prussian territory, and embarked at Cologne upon the Rhine, which he pursued until he reached Basle in Switzerland; and thence he resolved to travel post into Italy. Passing by Neufchatel and Geneva, he in due course arrived at the town of Chambery, which is in the Kingdom of Piedmont but within eight or ten miles of the French frontier. This place he reached on the tenth day after leaving England; and according to the intelligence which he received, the Princess of Wales and her suite were at that time staying at Milan. Accordingly, Jocelyn Loftus, after having rested at night at Chambery, ordered a post-chaise for the purpose of prosecuting his journey towards the capital of Lombardy: and now it was that the spy who had so unweariedly pursued him, was enabled to carry into effect the instructions he had received ere leaving England. For by means of bribing the postilions, he induced them to take the road towards the French frontier instead of that leading in the direction of Milan: and as Jocelyn was a perfect stranger to the route and was moreover absorbed in his reflections, he did not immediately notice that the vehicle was pursuing a south-western instead of a south-eastern direction. Nor were his suspicions excited until the chaise stopped in about an hour at a little town where the well-known uniforms of the French Custom House officers immediately met his eyes!

Then it immediately struck him that either some strange mistake had been made, or some foul treachery practised; and on inquiring the name of the place, he was informed that it was Les Echelles —a town on the French frontier. His passport was demanded; and with a sore misgiving did he produce it: for he now beheld *a certain English traveller* whom he had seen at one or two points during his journey, prompting the Custom House officers in their present proceeding. We need not inform the reader that this "certain Englishman" was the spy of the conspirators; but we may hasten to observe that Jocelyn was at once taken into custody on the double charge of travelling with a passport made out in a false name, and having escaped from the Prefecture of Police in Paris. Remonstrance was of course ineffectual; and our young hero was borne off to the prison at Grenoble—a large and celebrated French town at a distance of about thirty miles from Les Echelles.

He was not, however, treated with any rudeness or unnecessary harshness; and inasmuch as before he left England he had taken the precaution of having the Princess Sophia's letter sewn in the lining of his coat, it now escaped detection when he was required to produce the contents of his pockets. No stricter personal search than this was made by the officers; and thus the cherished credential passed not away from his possession at the same time with the other papers which were taken from him.

Behold, then, Jocelyn Loftus once more a prisoner in France—a captive, too, at the instance of those same conspirators in England who had been the means of provoking his former prisonage!

It is not our purpose to dwell at any considerable length upon this episode in the life of Jocelyn Loftus: but a few particulars are nevertheless necessary in order to give an idea of the treatment which he experienced during the renewed period of imprisonment that was now taking place. Two apartments on the debtors' side of the gaol at Grenoble were furnished in a comfortable and even handsome manner for his reception: a valet was specially appointed to wait upon him; and any orders which he chose to issue relative to his repasts were accurately attended to. One of the yards belonging to the prison was assigned solely to his use for taking exercise; but every precaution was adopted to prevent him from holding the slightest communication with any of the prisoners in the other parts of the establishment.

These details will sufficiently show that the French authorities were well aware that Jocelyn had committed no real offence, but that his captivity suited the purposes of certain high and influential personages in England. The governor of the prison behaved towards him in the most respectful manner, and visited him at least two or three times a-week to inquire concerning his health, and ascertain whether all his wants were properly attended to. It was on the occasion of one of the earliest of these visits that the French governor addressed Jocelyn Loftus in the following terms:—

"You may rest assured, sir, that not the slightest intention is entertained of using unnecessary harshness towards you; and I am instructed to state that if there be any relation or particular friend in England, or elsewhere, to whom you may wish to write occasionally, in order to relieve their minds from any uneasiness on your account, you are at liberty to do so—and I pledge you my honour as a gentleman that your letters shall be duly transmitted. At the same time, you will of course understand, sir, that you are not to state that you are in captivity—nor yet that you are at Grenoble;—but you can date your letters from any *other* city or town of France, and request that all replies may be sent to the post-office of such town, in which case those answers shall be duly forwarded to you hither. You will also take care to avoid inserting in your letters anything that may engender the suspicion that you are subject to coercion or restraint; and, in a word, you must place nothing upon record that may lead your friends in England to suspect you are not at liberty, and thus induce them to enter upon intrigues or adopt plans for the discovery of your whereabouts and the accomplishment of your rescue. Of course the letters that you may write will be perused by me before being transmitted to the post; and the answers sent thereto will also have to pass through my hands. Understanding the English language perfectly, I shall reserve this duty of supervision to myself, instead of entrusting it to any underling or interpreter. Thus, sir, so long as you adhere to the conditions which I have laid down, you need not hesitate to place on record any sentiment or feeling of a near and tender interest: for it will be through no motive of impertinent curiosity that I shall inspect your correspondence—and therefore I shall have neither eyes nor memory for anything that may appear

therein, save and except whatever may infringe upon the rules which I have laid down."

Although revolting against the shackles thus imposed upon the manner of conducting his correspondence, Jocelyn nevertheless bridled his indignation—being only too glad at the permission thus accorded to write to any one in England at all. He accordingly decided upon addressing his letters from Lyons, that being the nearest large city to Grenoble; and as a matter of course it was to Louisa—his well-beloved Louisa—that he wrote. In his letters to her he first stated that circumstances which he should explain when next they met, compelled him to date from Lyons, but that she need not be alarmed on perceiving that he was in France. Subsequently, as week after week of his imprisonment passed away and he was still compelled to date from Lyons, he declared that the circumstances previously alluded to in his earlier correspondence remained unchanged; but he carefully avoided any allusion that might lead his beloved Louisa to fancy that he was unhappy. On the contrary, he wrote in cheerful terms—far more cheerful than he felt; and this he did, not only to avoid infringing on the conditions so specifically laid down by the governor, but likewise because he did not choose to torture the charming girl by arousing any suspicions or fears in her mind relative to his actual position. For he saw plainly enough that even were she to ascertain the exact truth as to the circumstances in which he was placed, she could not help him: and thus, for more reasons than one, did he write in a manner as cheerful, as reassuring, and as encouraging as possible.

Louisa's answers were in the tenderest and most affectionate strain; and it was evident that although she suspected not his captivity, she nevertheless would have felt more completely at her ease if he were out of France altogether. But

as several weeks passed away, and she found (as she fancied) that he had nothing to complain of, and no perils nor calamities to report, she grew tranquillized as to his continued sojourn on the French soil. At the same time, she frequently expressed her surprise at his protracted residence in Lyons, when the English newspapers stated that "a certain royal lady and her suite" were sojourning elsewhere: but when the fair Louisa's letters did contain an allusion of this kind, it was invariably followed by some such observations as these:—"However, you are no doubt acting for the best; and I shall await your return in much suspense to hear from your own lips all that you are doing. You assure me that you are in good health and that I need not alarm myself as to your safety: you likewise give me the most affectionate assurances of your unchanging love—and therefore, what else can I require?"

Most dear to Jocelyn were these letters that he received from his beloved Louisa. They were indeed his whole and sole solace: for he knew not when his captivity was likely to terminate. The governor had repeated to him those same proposals which were made by the Prefect in Paris: namely, that if he would sign a solemn bond pledging himself to future non-interference in the affairs of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales, he should be immediately set at liberty: but to this condition, which our hero considered derogatory and dishonourable to a degree, he positively refused to subscribe. He therefore remained in prison, wondering how long it would be ere circumstances might take such a turn as to give him his release.

Thus weeks and months passed away; and at length, in the early part of March, the startling intelligence was one morning communicated to Jocelyn's ears that Napoleon Bonaparte, having fled from his little sovereignty of Elba, had landed in France and was advancing with a handful of men towards Grenoble. Still the governor maintained his authority in the prison; and when the Emperor—for as such did he return to France—entered Grenoble and was immediately joined by the garrison of the place, Jocelyn besought that his case might be represented to the imperial hero. The governor however assured Jocelyn that his instructions were to the effect that the affair of his imprisonment was to be kept altogether secret, and that so long as the present Minister of the Interior remained in power at Paris, he (the governor) could know no other authority. Thus Jocelyn's hopes of being enabled to obtain his freedom through the intervention of Napoleon, were for the moment defeated.

Towards the end of March the Emperor reached Paris—Louis XVIII and his Ministers all flying precipitately. A new Cabinet was of course installed; and so soon as the intelligence thereof reached Grenoble, the governor of the prison, who was naturally a kind-hearted man, hastened to Loftus, exclaiming, "Now at last may I venture to report your case to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor Napoleon."

Jocelyn was at first overjoyed at this apparent change in the circumstances of his position: but his spirits were somewhat damped again when the governor observed that there was a rumour of a general outbreak of hostilities in consequence o Napoleon's return, and that if this were true Jocelyn might still be retained in captivity as a prisoner of war. However, without being dismayed by this probability, and wasting no precious time in gloomy forebodings, Jocelyn drew up such a memorial as he thought would appeal to the generosity of Bonaparte: and this was at once transmitted to Paris, along with a corroborative report drawn up by the governor of the prison. It was not to be expected that very prompt attention would be paid thereto—for the Emperor was necessarily immersed in business: and nearly a month accordingly passed ere a response was received. At length it came, and was entirely favourable to Jocelyn's views. In an official document from the Minister of the Interior, it was methodically set forth that "the French authorities had no right to constitute themselves policemen or gaolers to suit the aims of a foreign prince; and that as for Jocelyn Loftus being detained on the ground of travelling with a false name, such a satisfactory explanation had been given in the memorial sent to his Imperial Majesty, that the immediate release of the aforesaid Jocelyn Loftus was ordained."

Thus was it that at the commencement of May our hero recovered his freedom; and in the sincerest manner did he express his gratitude to the governor for such kindnesses as he had experienced at his hands. He at once took a post-chaise and proceeded to Chambery in the Piedmontese dominions: and here he learned that the Princess of Wales with her suite was residing at a beautiful villa in the neighbourhood of Geneva. But ere he pursued his journey, Jocelyn wrote a long letter to Louisa, explaining to her everything that had taken place—how he had been imprisoned at Grenoble, and the circumstances under which he had penned all his correspondence with her and had received her replies. He also poured forth in an enthusiastic strain his declarations of unvarying affection: for he felt that he could now give free vent to his feelings in that respect without the risk of having his letters read by stranger eyes. He also said that he was at present on his way to Geneva to see the Princess; and he hoped that in a very short time he should be enabled to return to England and conduct his beloved Louisa to the altar. He also wrote a letter to Lady Sackville, with the contents of which we are not however at this period of our narrative supposed to be acquainted.

Having passed the night at Chambery, Jocelyn started at an early hour on the ensuing morning for Geneva; and as he was borne in the post-chaise along one of those splendid roads for which all the provinces of Savoy and Piedmont are famous, he weighed in his mind the course that he ought to adopt in fulfilling the mission with which he had charged himself towards the injured wife of the Prince Regent. If she were still surrounded by the spies and agents of the conspirators, as he had every reason to suspect, it would perhaps be difficult for him to obtain access to her; and if the three Misses Owen still formed a part of her household, they would not merely do all they could to prevent her Royal Highness from granting him an audience, but might even have recourse to representations calculated to blacken his character. He knew how completely her Royal Highness had been under the supervision of the spies and enemies who surrounded

her; and there was every reason to suppose that this supervision had not been relaxed during the last four or five months. Thus, though he was on the high road to Geneva, and though he would soon be within sight of the Princess's dwelling, and perhaps able to advance up to her very front door,—yet was it possible that after all he might experience considerable difficulty in obtaining access to her!

Having duly considered these matters, Jocelyn determined upon entering Geneva in as private a manner as possible; and instead of taking up his quarters at one of the fashionable hotels, procure some humbler lodging, so that he might stand the less risk of having his presence known in the city previous to obtaining an interview with the Princess. On arriving within four miles of Geneva, at about three o'clock in the afternoon, Jocelyn halted at a village the picturesque appearance of which delighted him so much that he longed to ramble for an hour or two in its beautiful environs. Moreover, as he had determined upon entering Geneva at dusk, he thought he could not do better than dine at this village; and he accordingly ordered the post-chaise to be put up at the little inn which occupied a prominent position amongst the few buildings constituting the place. Before he set out for his ramble, he sought the landlord to give instructions relative to his dinner; and the pretty peasant-girl who acted as waitress, introduced him to the master of the establishment—a stout good-looking man, who at the moment was engaged in conversation with another traveller. This individual had just arrived in a chaise, and was a thin, pale-faced, keen-eyed man, dressed in black.

"I propose to stay here until the evening," said Loftus, who, as the reader is well aware, was proficient in the French language, which was spoken in all that district: "and on my return from a little ramble which I am about to take in your beautiful neighbourhood, I shall be ready for such fare as you may be enabled to provide me."

"This gentleman is also going to dine here in a couple of hours," said the landlord, indicating the individual in black: "perhaps you two gentlemen would like to dine together?"

There was no objection raised on either side to this proposal; and Jocelyn accordingly set out for his ramble, with the understanding that dinner would be ready at five o'clock. During the interval our young hero wandered amongst the delicious groves, through the verdant fields, and amidst the vineyards, orchards, and gardens, which formed the environs of the beautiful village whose name we have forgotten, but which everybody who has travelled in those parts cannot fail to recognise.

At five o'clock he returned to the inn, and was introduced by the pretty waitress into a neatly furnished parlour, looking upon a garden, whence the evening breeze, balmy and fragrant, was wafted through the open window. The table was laid with characteristic neatness; and the pale-faced gentleman in black, who was to be Jocelyn's companion at the repast, was already there. He was a native of the country, and spoke French with that peculiar but by no means disagreeable accent which marks the Genevese. His appearance was not altogether prepossessing; but Jocelyn was not accustomed to judge men thereby—and as his companion proved to be endowed with great conversational powers, our hero soon forgot his sinister looks in the charms of his discourse. It appeared that he was a professional man residing at Geneva, and that he had come to the little village that afternoon to inspect some property in the neighbourhood which he was desirous of purchasing.

The fact of the Genevese gentleman giving this account of himself, was a sort of invitation for Jocelyn to do the same; and our hero accordingly said that he was an Englishman having some particular business of a private character to transact at Geneva, where he did not however expect to make a very long stay. He then asked if his companion happened to know whether the Princess of Wales had a large retinue, and in what style she was living?

The Genevese gentleman seemed rather struck by the circumstance that these questions should follow so closely upon the explanation previously given by our hero; and perhaps he inferred therefrom that "the business of a private character" which was taking Jocelyn to Geneva, was in some way or another connected with the Princess.

"Her Royal Highness," he said, "is living handsomely, but quietly:"—and here a peculiar smile for a moment curled the individual's lips—a smile which was so slight and so transitory that it would have escaped observation altogether, if its expression had not been so very strange, and even sinister.

"But I presume she has rendered herself much liked by her charities, and much respected by her virtues," said Jocelyn: "for she is an excellent lady—a most amiable Princess—and one whose purity of character has defied all the slander of her enemies."

"No doubt of it," said the Genevese gentleman, but with a dryness of tone and a peculiarity of manner which Jocelyn could not possibly help observing. "But what do they say of her in England, sir?" he asked.

"The great majority of the people," replied Loftus,—"those indeed who do not pander to Courtly profligacy, and are not deceived by the prejudices propagated and fostered by the blind worshippers of Royalty, know that she is innocent of every evil which is imputed to her. Yes—and they know also that she is the victim of a base, systematic, and cowardly persecution."

"You are warm in her defence, sir," remarked the professional gentleman, as he sipped his wine: for we should observe that dinner was served up immediately after Jocelyn entered the room, and that he and his companion were now seated at a table where, although it was but at a small village inn, all the dainties of the season were spread, forming indeed an admirable specimen of the united kitchens of France, Savoy, and Switzerland.

"Yes—I defend the Princess, sir," replied Jocelyn, "because I know that she *is* a victim and not a guilty woman. The vilest charges have been at different times made against her: the most atrocious calumnies have been levelled at her——But you will pardon me, sir, if I grow warm upon this subject: for I feel indignant as a man and as an Englishman, at the treatment which this foreign Princess has experienced from the cold-blooded sensualist, her husband. Can you tell me, sir, whether in her Royal Highness's household there are three young ladies named Owen?"

"Yes—I believe so," was the reply: "and if I mistake not, they are three very beautiful girls.

Yes—to be sure!" exclaimed the Genevese, as if suddenly recalling something to mind: "I remember that I once spoke to two of them."

"Ah! then you are acquainted with the persons attached to her Royal Highness?" said Jocelyn interrogatively.

"No—not to say *acquainted*," answered the professional gentleman. "I have had the honour of speaking to two or three of them, as I just now stated."

"Have you ever been inside the villa which her Royal Highness inhabits?" asked Jocelyn, not thinking that there was anything at all indiscreet in the question.

"Yes——no," returned the Genevese, suddenly correcting his first reply. "That is to say, I was once there: but——"

And stopping suddenly short, he had recourse to his wine-glass, as if to get rid of the necessity of saying any more upon the subject.

"I beg your pardon," said Jocelyn, "if I have been putting rude or impertinent queries to you——"

"Oh! not at all, not at all, I can assure you!" exclaimed the professional gentleman, again becoming all urbanity and politeness.

"We will talk upon another subject," said Jocelyn, perceiving that the former topic was somehow or another disagreeable or embarrassing: and he accordingly began to expatiate upon the beauties of the adjacent scenery and the picturesque view which was obtained of the mountains of Jura in the distance.

He found his companion perfectly ready to discourse upon the charming features of his own native clime: and thus the remainder of the dinner-hour was passed away agreeably enough. On the Continent it is not the custom to linger over the wine; and accordingly, soon after the dessert was placed upon the table, coffee was served up, and the landlord then came to announce that the professional gentleman's chaise was in readiness. That individual thereupon took his leave of Jocelyn, without any proposal that they should renew their acquaintance at Geneva: but this was by no means extraordinary, inasmuch as though people may get on very friendly terms together at foreign *tables d'hote*, it does not at all follow that the intimacy should continue when once they rise from table.

"Who is that gentleman?" inquired Loftus of the landlord when his dinner-companion had taken his departure in the hired chaise, or fly, which had brought him thither in the afternoon.

"I do not know, sir—I never saw him before," was the answer. "He came to inquire about a house and garden which are to sell in the neighbourhood: but either they did not suit his purposes or the price was too high, and so nothing has come of it. When will you have your post-chaise got ready, sir?"

"Not until sunset," answered Jocelyn. "The environs of your village are so beautiful that I shall take another ramble ere I proceed to the city."

Our hero accordingly set off again to visit the adjacent scenery; for as we have already stated, he did not wish to enter Geneva until it was dusk, the more surely to escape the notice of the Misses Owen, should they happen to be rambling or riding in the suburbs which he would have to traverse. But, seduced as it were by the beauty of the scenes amongst which he was now roving, and also giving way to the luxury of those thoughts which were inspired by his recovered freedom and the hope of shortly returning to England to make Louisa his bride, Jocelyn did not notice that he was still bending his steps farther and farther away from the village, although the sun was now setting. At the moment he awoke from a delicious reverie to the consciousness of the fact, he found himself almost close upon the margin of one of those sinuosities of the lake's configuration which indent its south-western shore.

The hour was delicious. The last beams of the setting sun were glimmering above the heights in the horizon;—a gentle breeze prevailed, just sufficient to give a welcome freshness after the heat of the day, but not to ruffle the surface of the lake; and the shepherd's pipe in the distance, the lowing of cattle, and the bleating of sheep, indicated that the herds and flocks were being driven home from the pastures. Although now recollecting that he must be a good three miles from the village, and that the hour was already come when he had ordered the post-chaise, Jocelyn could not help lingering on the margin of the lake to contemplate the effects of the departing sunlight playing flickeringly on that blue mass of sleeping water, while the white sails of a vessel also caught those beams ere they disappeared altogether. And at a distance of about half-a-mile might be seen the steeples and towers of Geneva, around which however the obscurity of evening was now gradually drawing its veil. Altogether the scene was most beautiful—the hour most delicious; and Jocelyn's heart appeared to leap within his breast as he contrasted the enjoyment of freedom and the power to range and rove amidst nature's sweetest spots at will, with the monotony and the suffocating sensation experienced in the tomb-like walls of a prison!

While he was thus standing upon the bank of Lake Leman, with the shades of evening closing in around him, he suddenly heard the tones of a female voice at a little distance. Listening more attentively, he could perceive that they were the accents of anguish—the wail of bitter repinings and of despair. Suddenly they ceased: and Jocelyn, straining his eyes in the direction whence they came, thought he could distinguish a female figure higher up the bank towards Geneva. Hesitating whether he should advance and ascertain if it were any distress that admitted of his power to alleviate—or whether such a proceeding might not be an intrusion upon the sanctity of a sorrow that had perhaps sought the solitude of the place and hour to give itself vent and indulge in the luxury of unseen tears,—he remained standing where he was. But in a few moments he heard a heavy plunge, as of a human being falling into the water, followed by a gurgling sound. Not another instant did he hesitate,—but speeding towards the spot, he at the moment beheld a female, clad in a dark dress, rise to the surface of the lake. Plunging in, Jocelyn grasped her garments, and with some difficulty drew her to land.

She was not altogether senseless, but panted and gasped fearfully—so that he thought life must pass away in the midst of those strong spasms. He scarcely knew how to assist her: for delicacy prevented him from tearing open her garments so as to

allow free scope for the expansion of her chest and the full play of the air in her lungs: but he was about to sacrifice this sentiment to the emergency of the case, when the lady appeared to revive all in a moment. We say *lady*, because such she seemed to be, as well as Jocelyn could make any observation concerning her in the uncertain light which dimly shone upon the scene.

"Oh! what have you done?" she exclaimed in accents penetrated with despair, as she glanced wildly around and then fixed her eyes upon Jocelyn: but the next moment springing from his arms as he was supporting her, she rushed down the bank and plunged again into the water.

Fortunate was it for her that the moon now suddenly broke forth in all its splendour, bathing the surrounding heights, the buildings of the city, and the surface of the lake in a flood of the purest silver—so that Loftus at once marked where the lady rose again to the surface; and springing in once more, he caught her, at the very instant she was about to sink, by her long dark hair which was floating like a mourning veil upon the water. Again, therefore, did our young hero rescue the desperate fair one from a watery grave: but as he dragged her up the bank, she struggled violently to disengage herself from his grasp and accomplish her suicidal purpose. For nearly a minute Jocelyn was placed in extreme danger by this proceeding on her part: but he succeeded in retaining the footing he had gained when having dragged the lady within his depth—and despite her resistance he once more landed her safely on the bank.

"I do not thank you, sir—I do not thank you," she said in English, while gasping for breath. "You have brought me back to a life whence I am resolved to fly——"

"O lady!" cried Jocelyn, reproachfully; "is it indeed a countrywoman of mine own—a daughter of England—who speaks in such shocking terms——"

"Pardon me, sir—pardon me!" exclaimed the lady, her heart suddenly touched by the kindness of Jocelyn's manner, although his words were reproachful. "To you at least I owe nothing but gratitude in risking your life twice to save mine!"

Thus speaking, she unresistingly suffered him to conduct her away from the brink of the lake; but scarcely had they proceeded twenty yards, when she sank down in a state of exhaustion, though still retaining her consciousness.

Jocelyn raised the lady, and placed her against a bank. He then sat down by her side, urging her to compose her feelings and summon all her presence of mind to her aid; for he feared lest, when her physical energies should return, she might make another attempt upon her life. While thus addressing her, he had an opportunity of observing her more attentively than at first. Her bonnet and shawl, as he was presently informed, had come off when she first plunged into the lake; and her hair was now flowing, dripping with wet and in the wildest disorder, over her shoulders. She wore a mourning dress of excellent texture: and her appearance, despite all present disadvantages, fully indicated her social position to be that of a lady in good circumstances. Her features were regular and handsome; her complexion was dark, but now somewhat sallow rather than pale, through grief; and her countenance had a haggard expression. She possessed a fine figure, with a noble bust,—and was apparently about twenty six or twenty-seven years of age.

Such was the hurried survey which Jocelyn was enabled to take of the lady whom he had rescued from death: and at the expiration of two or three minutes the thoughts which forced themselves upon her mind, seemed to effect a great change within her.

"It was in a moment of madness—of utter despair," she said, suddenly breaking silence and turning her large dark eyes full upon our hero, "that I made the rash—the wicked attempt upon my life, which your timely presence and noble conduct so providentially frustrated. And, Oh! it was the shame—the bitterness—the rage, at having been rescued a first time, which made me still more desperate the second time——But, Ah!" she abruptly exclaimed, "what must you think of me? what will the world think of me?"

"Lady," said Jocelyn, in a deep and earnest tone, "I am a man of honour, and will never breathe to a living soul—without your permission—the occurrence of this evening. As for what I may think of you, believe me it is in my nature to put the most charitable construction upon your conduct. Then, as for the world, whose opinion you dread so much—wherefore need it ever become acquainted with your secret?"

"O generous young man!" exclaimed the lady, with a perfect effusion of gratitude in her accents and in her looks: "you fill me with hope—with confidence—with courage!"—then rising abruptly from the bank, she said, "Come—we must depart hence. You shall repair with me to my place of abode, where I will order a change of apparel to be provided you. But of course," she instantaneously added, "it was an *accident*—and not an attempt at *self-destruction*——"

"Madam, I promise not to betray you," observed Jocelyn, with earnest sincerity: "and if you would prefer that I should leave you this minute—so that I may not learn who you are, by proceeding with you to your own abode——"

"Your generosity is equal to your courage," answered the lady. "But if I am not interfering with your arrangements, you must come with me. I could not think of leaving you thus dripping from head to foot—your hat, too, is gone—— Besides, if I choose to conceal from you who and what I am, I shall have no difficulty in so doing: for I am now residing at Geneva in the utmost seclusion—with a false name—and under very peculiar circumstances," she added, in a voice which suddenly fell to tones of the lowest despondency. "However, it is probable that I may tell you my history—for after what you have done for me, I owe you all possible gratitude and confidence—yes, and likewise the love which a sister bears towards a brother."

While thus conversing, the lady and Jocelyn walked together away from the lake in the direction of the town. They assuredly presented a somewhat singular appearance—both dripping, with nothing on their heads, and the lady's hair flowing in wet masses over her shoulders. But fortunately they encountered no one until they reached the nearest buildings: and then, as the lady immediately conducted our hero into a narrow and dark street, the few persons whom they

did meet there, took no particular notice of them.

In this manner they proceeded until they reached a gloomy-looking building, where a lamp was burning over the entrance. Here the lady pulled a bell, the sounds of which, as they met Jocelyn's ears, seemed as if emanating from some cloistral or cavern-like place. The door was almost immediately opened by an individual bearing a light: and Jocelyn at once recognized the gentleman with whom he had that afternoon dined at the adjacent village.

CHAPTER CLI.

THE TWO DOORS AT THE END OF THE PASSAGE.

This recognition was mutual: and the lady at once noticed, with evident surprise, that her deliverer from the depths of Lake Leman was acquainted with the person who had just opened the door in obedience to her summons.

"You know Dr. Maravelli, then?" she immediately said, fixing her eyes upon our hero, and speaking in French.

"I had the pleasure of dining in his company to-day," answered Loftus, in the same language: "but I was not then acquainted with his name. Nor did I anticipate the pleasure of so soon meeting him again.

"It seems as if we were destined to be thrown in each other's way," said Maravelli, with a courteous smile: "and I at once accept that destiny by bidding you welcome to my house. If I did not give you an invitation hither when we parted this afternoon, it was through no disinclination—— But, Ah! you are both dripping wet! Yes—and hatless the one—without scarf and bonnet the other! Good heavens—all this denotes a splash in the Lake——"

"An accident which befell me," the lady hastened to observe, "and to which I am indebted for the honour of this gentleman's acquaintance. Or rather, I should say, I am indebted to him for my life: and you will admit, Dr. Maravelli, that I could not do otherwise than invite him hither to obtain such change of raiment as you may be enabled to afford?"

"Oh! for that matter no time shall be lost," exclaimed the doctor: "and not only change of raiment too, but a bed shall be cheerfully placed at your disposal, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Jocelyn.

Then, leading the way, he hastily summoned his housekeeper Mavolta, to whose care the lady resigned herself: while he conducted Jocelyn up a wide but gloomy staircase, along a passage with an array of chamber-doors on either side, and the aspect of which was precisely such as would be ascribed by a romance-writer to a house that was haunted. Opening one of the doors, the doctor showed Jocelyn into a bed-chamber, handsomely furnished, but in a sombre style. The draperies were heavy—two or three large cupboards of a dark-stained wood filled up the recesses—and there was altogether an absence of that lightness, cheerfulness, and elegance, which usually combine as the attributes of sleeping-apartments in the city of Geneva.

Jocelyn did not, however, loiter to dwell particularly upon the features of the chamber, but hastened to divest himself of his own dripping apparel, and assume the entire change which Dr. Maravelli placed at his disposal. By the time he had thus shifted his raiment, the physician returned to conduct him down-stairs, to a handsome dining-room, where a table was spread for supper.

"And now," said Dr. Maravelli, "you must inform me how this accident took place?"

"You must know," answered Jocelyn, "that after we separated at the village, I was seduced by the loveliness of the evening to ramble again into the environs ere I came on to Geneva. But not noticing how time was slipping away, nor how far I was walking, I presently reached the border of the lake. In a few minutes I heard a heavy plunge—a splash—a gurgling sound——"

"Ah! I understand," said Maravelli. "My fair lodger, who is most romantically fond of twilight walks and moonlit rambles, was roving in that same direction when she fell in—eh? Some parts of the Lake are dangerous enough for the incautious stroller during the obscurity. And so you had the good fortune to rescue her? Then you have not as yet taken up your quarters at any particular place in Geneva?"

"No," replied Loftus. "And now that I bethink me, my prolonged absence from the village-inn must excite the strangest suspicions. The landlord will fancy some accident has occurred—or that I have purposely fled."

"I will despatch some one thither, with any message you choose to send," said Maravelli. "Of course you will accept of such hospitality as my humble dwelling can afford for this night?"

"I shall do so with gratitude," returned Jocelyn: "and if to-morrow you can help me to suitable lodgings you will add to the obligations under which I am already placed towards you. To speak plainly, I have business to transact of a somewhat delicate nature; and it accords with my purposes to remain in strict seclusion at Geneva for a day or two."

"Then you wish to find a quiet retired lodging?" said Maravelli: "in fact, a place where you will be secure against the pryings of impertinent curiosity——"

"Such is exactly my desire," returned Jocelyn. "I seek for the utmost privacy——"

"Then it is possible," said Maravelli, in a musing tone, "that I myself can accommodate you. But I must see what Madame Roberts says upon the point, as I never take one lodger to the annoyance of another—and very seldom gentlemen at all."

"Ah! what of me?" exclaimed the lady whom Jocelyn had rescued from a watery grave, as she entered the room at the moment.

She had changed all her apparel, but was still dressed in half-mourning, with her hair now arranged in massive bands. She looked what may be termed interestingly handsome—for she was decidedly possessed of a very fine person and of striking features, although her cheeks were colourless and even sunken, and an expression of profound melancholy sate upon her countenance.

"I was just observing, madam," said Dr. Maravelli, as with the greatest respect he placed a chair for her, "that if you had no objection to this gentleman becoming a lodger in my house for a short time—a very short time——"

"Under any other circumstances than those which have this evening occurred," interrupted the lady, with a peculiar look and significant tone as she addressed herself to the doctor, "I should decidedly have objected to any such arrangement."

"Yes, Madame Roberts—I know it, I know it," Maravelli hastened to observe. "Under any other circumstances, no doubt: but as this gentleman was so providentially thrown in your way to snatch you from a watery grave, I think that he may at once be regarded in the light of a friend—something more than a mere acquaintance—especially as he is a countryman of your own——"

"This is precisely the view which I take of the matter," said the lady, who, it appeared, passed by the name of *Madame Roberts*: "and therefore, if this gentleman——But we are as yet strangers to each other by name," she added with a mournful smile, "though already speaking of friendship."

"The name that figures upon my passport," said our hero, "is *Jocelyn Loftus*."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mrs. Roberts, with a sudden start: and she surveyed our hero with evident surprise, curiosity, and interest.

"Is it possible this name is known to you?" asked Jocelyn, though not with any mistrust or alarm: for there was something in the lady's manner, language, and indeed her whole appearance, which convinced him that her own sorrows, whatever they might be, were of too deep and absorbing a character to permit her to harbour treacherous designs towards another: and there was altogether an air of genuine frankness and sincerity about her which placed Jocelyn quite at his ease on that head.

"Yes—the name of Jocelyn Loftus is indeed known to me," she answered; "and honourably so!"—then turning to Dr. Maravelli, she said, "By all means, if you can accommodate this gentleman, do so. You have just heard that his name is known to me—I can assure you it is one that would not disgrace the interior of a palace!"

It was now Jocelyn's turn to survey with astonishment, curiosity, and interest this lady who thus frankly and generously became a guarantee for his respectability, and who likewise spoke of him in such flattering terms. But she made a rapid sign to him, unperceived by Maravelli, to intimate that this was *not* the moment for farther explanations; and he accordingly withdrew his inquiring looks and held back the verbal questions that were about to issue from his tongue. Almost at the same moment the door opened; and the doctor's housekeeper, Mavolta, entered bearing a tray on which were several dishes that sent forth a savoury perfume.

"And now, by the by," said Maravelli, "relative to this message which you desire to be sent to the village-inn?"

"If it be understood that I am to take up my quarters at your house," answered Jocelyn, "let my baggage be fetched from the inn—the bill paid—and the post-chaise dismissed back to Chambery, where I hired it."

Thus speaking, Jocelyn produced money from his purse to defray the items alluded to; and Mavolta was at once charged with the duty of despatching a messenger to the village-inn.

The physician, Mrs. Roberts, and Jocelyn now sat down to supper; and during the meal the conversation turned upon a variety of indifferent topics. The lady, though evidently oppressed by a profound sense of affliction,—and also suffering from the exhausting influences of her two immersions in the water and all the excitement which had accompanied those attempts at self-destruction,—nevertheless proved an agreeable companion. She strove to be cheerful; and as her conversational powers were by no means limited, she could not make such an effort without succeeding to a certain extent. As for Maravelli, he gave free scope to that garrulous propensity which he really possessed when apart from the considerations of business: and thus, altogether, Jocelyn spent by no means an unpleasant evening.

But still he was under the influence of no ordinary sentiment of curiosity. Who was this Madame or Mrs. Roberts, avowedly living under a feigned name at the house of the Genevese physician? His wife she assuredly was not; because if so, why should the fact be concealed?—and his mistress she did not seem to be, inasmuch as he treated her with the utmost deference and respect instead of with familiarity. Indeed, her own deportment was such as to convince Jocelyn that she was really what was represented—namely, a lodger in Dr. Maravelli's house and a boarder at his table. But was it not a singular dwelling for a lady to choose? Whether married or a widow, there seemed something imprudent or suspicious in her fixing her residence beneath such a roof. And that she *was* a lady by birth, education, and social position, was beyond all doubt. That she had moved in the very best circles, too, was also apparent: for in the course of conversation she let slip a few allusions to personages of the highest rank in England, and with whom she was evidently acquainted. Nor were these allusions made with the air of one who artfully and purposely suffers her brilliant connexions thus to transpire: but whatever Mrs. Roberts said of this kind, was given utterance to in all frankness and sincerity. Who then could she be—this lady who was surrounded by so much mystery?

Of course Jocelyn had not failed to observe how intent she was upon some inward woe, even while struggling to seem cheerful and to force herself to take a due share in the conversation. Her double attempt at suicide had indeed proven that the grief which she cherished was of the most poignant nature; and during the occasional pauses which occurred in the discourse, Jocelyn observed a sudden expression of ineffable anguish sweep over her features, and then be succeeded with so sinister a gloom that it was by no means difficult to understand that she experienced the goading sense of a deep wrong and cherished an implacable vengeance.

There was a suspicion which Jocelyn had formed concerning this lady from the very first moment he had dragged her forth from the water: for then, as her garments clung closely to her, her shape appeared to indicate that she was in the way to become a mother. But upon this idea the natural delicacy of our hero's feelings did not permit him to dwell, even in the deep recess of his own soul. At the same time, if this suspicion were correct, and if she were a widow, as her mourning garment led him to believe (although she wore not the widow's cap nor characteristic sleeve), then would the circumstance

afford a clue to the reading of the mystery concerning her. Indeed, it would then even become almost intelligible enough, without waiting to hear the tale from her own lips, why she sought the retirement of a physician's house in a city so far removed from her native England.

When supper was over, Dr. Maravelli rose from the table and begged to apologise for a brief absence on the plea that he had a patient to visit. Jocelyn and Mrs. Roberts were accordingly left alone together.

"Madam," said our hero, now addressing the lady in English, after a brief silence, which had followed the closing of the door behind Dr. Maravelli; "you will pardon me for seeking the earliest opportunity to revive the topic which was engaging us ere now—I mean relative to your knowledge of my name——"

"I not only know the name of Jocelyn Loftus," said Mrs. Roberts, with a peculiar look, "but also that which is really your own."

"Ah!" ejaculated our hero: "then how is it that I am thus known to you?"

"Hush! we may not speak upon these matters now or here," interrupted the lady. "The doctor may return at any moment—or he may overhear us from some adjacent room: for this is a strange rambling house—old-fashioned and tortuous in its arrangements as a feudal castle; and there is no knowing from what neighbouring apartment our host may listen to anything that is taking place in this?"

"Then do you not think that he has really gone out?" inquired Jocelyn.

"I dare say he has," replied the lady: "but it is quite possible he may return sooner than we expect. He says that he does not understand English: but prudence forbids us from relying on that averment."

"Then will you, madam," asked Jocelyn, "give me an early opportunity of conversing with you alone, and in some place where we shall be free from interruption?"

"Yes—for I also wish to converse with you—and the sooner the better," said Mrs. Roberts. "I am acquainted with your object—I know your design—and if I can possibly forward it——But here am I doing precisely what I counselled you not to do—that is, talking on private matters——"

"And yet what suspense shall I remain in until opportunity serves for the promised explanations!" said Jocelyn. "When can you favour me——"

"To-night, if you will," observed Mrs. Roberts, after a few moments' reflection. "We will meet when the house is quiet:"—then as if instantaneously understanding what an equivocal construction might be put upon this proposal, she hastened to observe, "I have no doubt you will be located in one of the rooms opening from the long passage on the first floor. At the end of that passage there is a drawing-room, looking on the garden at the back of the house. I will be there within half-an-hour from the time that the household retires to rest."

Jocelyn, who at once comprehended the delicacy which prompted this arrangement, thanked the lady for the appointment so given, and promised to avail himself of it. They then talked upon indifferent matters; and in a few minutes Dr. Maravelli came back. Soon afterwards Mrs. Roberts rose for the purpose of retiring to her own room; and when she had taken her departure, the doctor said to Jocelyn, "Now, without seeking in any way to penetrate into your affairs or your business at Geneva, permit me to observe that if I can forward your views or assist you in any way, I shall feel delighted to do so."

Our hero thanked the physician for this proposal—guardedly observing that if he required his succour he would avail himself of it. He then requested to be allowed to retire for the night; and he was accordingly conducted to the same bedroom where he had ere now changed his apparel.

His baggage had been duly fetched from the village-inn, and was in the chamber allotted to him. He accordingly whiled away the time by taking out the things that he should require for his morning's toilette, until he thought it time to repair to the room indicated by Mrs. Roberts. She had said that she would be there half-an-hour after the household should have retired, and when the establishment was silent: but heaven knows it had all along been silent as the tomb. Indeed the silence of that house had something ominous and appalling in it. It seemed the silence of the dead. Though Jocelyn was in all the vigour of youth—with the fine glowing intellect of earliest manhood—endowed with the loftiest courage and the noblest spirit, yet did he feel as if the interior aspect of that house, so sombre and so gloomy, were sufficient to damp his energies and fill him with melancholy forebodings. He thought of the passage outside, with its two arrays of doors; and he wondered if those rooms were tenanted by lodgers, or if they were left to dilapidation and decay. That they were for the most part unoccupied he felt convinced—not merely because he had neither seen nor heard of any lodger save Mrs. Roberts, but likewise because it was impossible that the house could be so still if there were so many inhabitants beneath its roof.

However, Jocelyn's reflections were cut short by the arrival of the moment when he deemed it fit to issue forth from his chamber and seek the drawing-room mentioned by Mrs. Roberts. He opened the door noiselessly—took the candle in his hand—and proceeded stealthily along the passage. The boards creaked under his feet—the light threw strange shadows upon the wall—and Jocelyn felt, not as if he were threatened by any danger, but as if he were doing something that was wrong. It was a feeling of uneasiness perfectly intelligible and natural under the circumstances.

On reaching the end of the passage, he suddenly found himself placed in an awkward dilemma: for there were *two* doors fronting him, and he knew not which to choose. He examined both the doors carefully, in order to ascertain if a light glimmered through the key-hole of either: but no—all was darkness. He stooped down and peeped—he likewise listened at each key-hole: but darkness and silence seemed to reign within either apartment. What was he to do? Should he retrace his steps to his own chamber and return presently? Or had the lady been deceiving him? And now, for the first time, did it occur to Loftus that some treachery might be intended him. Yet how and what? No, it could not be. The lady had not thrown herself in his way to seduce him to that house; their meeting had been purely acci-

dental; and therefore was it unlikely indeed that chance had thus led him through such a train of circumstances into any net previously spread to ensnare him.

All these reflections passed rapidly through Jocelyn's mind in less than a minute; and reassured by the conclusion to which he came, he resolved upon pushing the present adventure to the end. He accordingly opened one of the doors at a venture, and walked into the room with which it communicated. No one was there: and Jocelyn was immediately about to retreat, when, perceiving a number of implements used in chemical pursuits, he was impelled by a feeling of curiosity to pause for an instant and take a closer survey of that apartment. It was not large—had no appearance of a drawing-room—and therefore could not be the one to which Mrs. Roberts had alluded. Indeed, it resembled an alchemist's study, save and except that the furnace inseparable from such a place was not there. A gloomy-looking apartment was it, with these implements of fantastic shapes scattered about—a huge volume, secured with dingy brazen clasps, lying on the floor—and large cupboards occupying the deep recesses,—all serving to conjure up ideas of those laboratories of the middle age where sages pursued their researches deep into the night, patiently awaiting the happy moment (but a moment which never came) when the philosopher's stone should appear in precipitation at the bottom of a crucible, or the elixir of life should distil drop by drop from the lips of a retort!

Jocelyn was so struck by the appearance of this chamber, that he forgot for the moment his appointment with Mrs. Roberts and all the other circumstances which had so recently been paramount in his mind. Indeed, he felt a strong inclination to open that massive volume and examine its contents: but the next instant he blushed

with very shame at the bare idea of thus penetrating into the secrets which pertained to Dr. Maravelli, if secrets they indeed were.

But as he stood in the middle of that room, gazing around by the light of the candle which he held in his hand, he became aware of a powerful odour of spices which gradually stole upon his senses; and this was mingled with *another* smell, of a far different character, and which seemed to be that of death! It was strange how these two odours struck simultaneously, and yet so distinctly and differently, upon the olfactory nerve: but so it was—and the notion of *something embalmed* speedily forced itself upon Jocelyn's imagination.

It was now quite mechanically—indeed, altogether in an unpremeditated way—that Loftus opened one of the cupboard-doors which stood ajar. But, heavens! how sudden and convulsive was the start which he gave, as two rows of human heads bristled up before his view. Yes—there they were—two ranges of human heads, looking out at him with fixed and glassy gaze from the recesses of that cupboard! But our hero's terror was only momentary. Hideous and shocking as the spectacle might be, he was not a child to be terrified by it: he recoiled in horror, but he trembled not with alarm. On the contrary, he now inspected those heads more closely; and he found that, being embalmed, they were as he suspected the sources of the blended odours which had struck so powerfully on his sense. But he also observed that the shaven crowns were delicately marked with a number of lines, dividing the surface of the cranium into several sections, each section being distinguished by a figure. Inside the cupboard-door was pasted a paper of references; and Jocelyn speedily understood that the use of those embalmed heads was for the study of phrenology or craniology, in pursuance of the systems of Gall and Spurzheim, at that time engaging the attention of many learned and scientific men in Europe.

A person of Jocelyn's good sense could not of course feel any antipathy towards Dr. Maravelli for having in his possession these accessories to a most interesting study. On the contrary, his good opinion of the physician as an intellectual man was considerably enhanced; and again did he long to peer into that book which was so well secured with the great brazen clasps. But no—he would not thus violate the sanctity of a volume which might be in manuscript and not in print, and therefore doubly sacred. Indeed, he began to feel that he was guilty of an offence in even lingering in this chamber upon the mysteries of which he had intruded. But then he had not found the door locked; and it was therefore evident—or at least might be presumed—that Dr. Maravelli did not consider the place as the depository of any important secrets, however well furnished it might be with curiosities.

Issuing forth from this chamber, and closing the door carefully behind him, Jocelyn proceeded to the other door facing the passage: and without hesitation he at once tried it. It opened, revealing an inner door covered with scarlet cloth. This our hero likewise pushed open; and now he found himself in a drawing-room where a lamp was burning upon the table, and Mrs. Roberts was pacing to and fro, apparently in a very agitated manner.

"Pardon me, madam—I am afraid I have kept you waiting," said Jocelyn, as closing the two doors, he advanced into the spacious room, which though well furnished, partook of that same sombre aspect that characterised the entire establishment. "The truth is, I mistook the apartment. Not perceiving a light glimmering through the key-hole or underneath the door——"

"Because of this inner door," observed the lady. "I forgot to tell you, in the hurry of our discourse ere now, which door it was at the end of the passage that communicated with the drawing-room. The other, I believe, is the doctor's lumber-room, for his chemical apparatus. I once peeped in—but not liking the appearance, did not cross the threshold."

"For my own part," observed Jocelyn, "I cannot help wondering that you find courage enough to live in this gloomy abode——"

"Courage, indeed!" said Mrs. Roberts bitterly: "had you not a pretty specimen of my cowardice this evening?"

"Pardon me for making an observation so indiscreet—so improper," interrupted Jocelyn. "Believe me, madam, I would not for the world aggravate your sorrow. It is, beyond doubt, already too great for you to endure! No—not for worlds would I enhance it!" he added with that generous vehemence which showed that the assurance came gushing up from the recesses of his heart.

"I believe you—I believe you, Mr. Loftus," said the lady, extending her hand towards him: then, with a peculiar smile suddenly appearing upon her countenance, she said, "I suppose that I am to call you Mr. Loftus?"

"Yes—if you please," was the quick response. "That other name—I believe that I have renounced it for ever——But no matter—I await in anxiety any explanations you may have to give me——"

"Mr. Loftus," resumed the lady, motioning him to take a seat, and placing herself in a chair at a little distance from the one which he took: "in the first place, I must speak about myself. After what has occurred this evening you have a right to know something about me. Nay, do not interrupt me: I know full well what you would say. You would tell me that the service you have rendered me forms not in your estimation any claim upon my confidence. But I think otherwise. At all events I feel as if heaven itself threw you in my way! I cannot fancy that it was a mere accident—one of the common incidents of life—which thus brought us together. I therefore feel a desire, so to speak—a craving, a longing, to tell you somewhat of my own history. It seems to me as if it would be a solace and a consolation thus to unburthen myself partially to you. Nor will there be anything indiscreet or improper in this: for although you are so young a man, and I am not so very much further advanced in years," she observed, with a melancholy smile, "yet do circumstances cause us to stand in the light of friends—so that the confidence which I may impart and you receive, will be such as a sister may communicate to a brother. Tell me then, Mr. Loftus—tell me," she added, in a tone and with a look of the most mournful entreaty—indeed of pathetic supplication—"will you permit me to speak of my sorrows and of my wrongs in your hearing?"

"Assuredly—most assuredly, if it will in the slightest degree soothe your afflictions:"—and as Jocelyn thus spoke, he surveyed with a boundless

compassion that lady who thus plaintively addressed him.

"And yet mine is but a common history after all," she exclaimed, starting from her seat in a state of considerable excitement. "It is the usual history of woman—that is to say, of the woman who is weak enough and foolish enough to forget her duty and place confidence in the protestations of deceitful man! Oh! Mr. Loftus, such has been my case. I have already told you that the name which I bear beneath this roof is a false one: I shall not now tell you what my real one is. On a future occasion perhaps I may do so—or accident may reveal it to you. But no matter! You see that I am a lady by education, and I trust in manners. Such indeed is my social rank—such also is my title in our own native land. I have been married, but am a widow. In an evil hour I listened to the tale of love which a nobleman—handsome, elegant, and fascinating—breathed in my ears. He was married—and I therefore knew that he could not love me honourably. But, O Mr. Loftus! I listened to the dictates of my heart in preference to those of reason: in the tide of passion all prudence and propriety were swallowed up. Several strange and romantic circumstances combined to precipitate my fall. But on these I need not dwell. Suffice it to say that I *did* fall—and that no sooner had I surrendered myself to him who vowed that he loved me, than he abruptly and precipitately quitted England. It is true that he sent me a note protesting his sorrow and anguish at this departure, which, as he alleged, an imperious necessity enforced: but he therein declared that he knew not how long his absence might last—certainly for some weeks—perhaps for many months. Altogether, the style was so laconic—so strange and so unsatisfactory, if not positively chilling—that I was filled with despair. I saw that I had been cheated—deluded—deceived, by a base profligate—that I had been treated as one of those unfortunate creatures whom men take as the companions of a transitory enjoyment and fleeting pleasure!"

As she thus spoke in accents full of concentrated bitterness, the unfortunate lady covered her face with her hands; and the next moment Jocelyn could perceive the tears trickling between her fingers. He sympathised deeply with her: but what could he say—what could he do to console her? Her's was a grief which admitted of no solace from human lips: but if consolation could be offered to her at all, it must be from one of her own sex, between whom and herself the circumstances of etiquette and propriety interposed no formal barrier.

"On receiving that note," the lady at length resumed, having hastily wiped away her tears, "I was overwhelmed with despair. But reflection showed me that if I had thus been made the dupe of a heartless debauchee, I should at least strive to conceal my dishonour from the world. To give way to utter despondency or frantic grief, would only be to excite suspicion, which might lead on to exposure. I accordingly resolved to cherish my wrong in secret. But here I must suddenly digress for the purpose of informing you that it was at this very time I had an opportunity of hearing her Royal Highness, the Princess Charlotte of Wales, speak of you to her aunt the Princess Sophia. No matter under what circumstances I thus became an ear-witness to the discourse of those royal ladies. Suffice it to say that as they spoke somewhat unguardedly in my presence, enough fell from their lips, ere they recollected themselves, to make me acquainted with many particulars concerning yourself. If you wish me to tell you the exact truth, I must observe that the Princesses spoke of you in the most enthusiastic terms—praising your chivalrous character, dwelling with grateful admiration on the enterprise in which you had embarked, and deploring the previous misfortunes and calamities in which you had been involved when imprisoned in Paris. Thus was it that the discourse of the two Princesses not only revealed to my ears who you really were, but also impressed me with the highest opinion of your merits. Can you therefore wonder if I ere now spoke so confidently concerning your honour as an English gentleman, when recommending Dr. Maravelli, to receive you as a lodger beneath his roof?"

"I thank you, madam," said Jocelyn, "for the flattering terms in which you speak of me. As for the object of my present visit to Geneva, it is dictated by the illimitable compassion I experience for a much injured Princess."

"Yes, I am no stranger," continued the lady, "to the mission which you have undertaken in respect to the unfortunate wife of the Prince Regent. I am likewise acquainted with the fact that you are the bearer of a letter from the Princess Sophia to her Royal Highness——But I am at a loss to understand," she suddenly exclaimed, "how it is that having quitted England in December on this mission, you are only now about to accomplish it—and yet it's the month of May."

"I have suffered fresh imprisonment and persecution in France," returned Loftus. "But on these heads I will give you full details anon. Meantime, madam, may I request you to proceed with your own history?"

"I now then take up the thread of the sorrowful narrative which regards myself," said Mrs. Roberts. "The abrupt departure of my noble lover—his disgraceful abandonment of me within a few hours after I had given him the last and fondest proof of affection which it is in woman's power to bestow—was not the only calamity that my weakness and folly had entailed upon me. While I was endeavouring by the assumption of a calm demeanour to veil the sense of dishonour and of wrong that gnawed at my heart's core, the tongue of scandal was busy with my name. Insidious whisperings were circulated relative to me; and certain particulars, wherein the ludicrous was strangely blended with the romantic, were rumoured relative to my amour. It now became necessary for me to withdraw from the sphere wherein I had been accustomed to move: for, alas! my reputation was undermined, even if it were not altogether destroyed. When a frail and erring woman, Mr. Loftus, is placed under the ban of society, it is not her guilt that is punished, but her want of cunning and tact in concealing it. The Spartan children in ancient times were not chastised for stealing, but for their clumsiness in not being able to conceal their thefts: and thus is it with regard to the frailty of ladies in fashionable life. But I will not pause to moralize upon the point—nor do I seek in what I have said a justification or an excuse for my own errors. No: I have fallen, and I

am punished for my fall. Forced to withdraw, as I have said, from the sphere wherein I had been accustomed to move, I came upon the Continent. This was in January last: and I took up my abode in Paris, where for some weeks I dwelt in seclusion. A faithful female friend in London, with whom I corresponded, informed me from time to time that my noble lover—should I not rather say, destroyer of my peace—was reported to be still upon the Continent. Suddenly an idea struck me—and I marvelled that it had not entered my mind before. What if I were to seek him—endeavour to bring him back to my arms—make him atone for the wrong he had done me by the present tenderness and future constancy of his behaviour towards me? I longed to seek him for this purpose. But my pride stood in the way! As a woman I had been wronged—as a woman I craved for revenge. Revenge! no, not if he would love me still! A few more weeks passed—and at length I found——Oh! how can I confess the humiliating truth to you, Mr. Loftus? ——But still it must be told—and that truth is, I became painfully aware that my dishonour would bear its fruit—that I was in the way to become a mother——"

Mrs. Roberts averted her head while she made this avowal in low and tremulous accents; then with a profound sigh she became suddenly silent. Jocelyn felt all the awkwardness of their relative position—he, a young man, alone at that midnight hour with her, a young woman—and *she* making these strange and painful revealings to his ears, while *he* experienced for her a sympathy and a compassion to which however he knew not how to give expression! For when a woman, young and handsome, is not only frail, but makes an avowal of her frailty—the words of sympathy which a generous-hearted young man, himself young and handsome, would utter, might so easily be construed into advances of a tender and improper character. It might even be supposed that he was taking advantage of that very weakness which the frail one avowed, in order to obtain the gratification of his own selfish desires. Jocelyn, noble-hearted as he was generous and high-minded, was nevertheless man of the world enough to appreciate alike the delicacy and the awkwardness of his position, in the light which we have just been pointing it out. Thus was it that he forbore from giving expression to the sympathy which he in reality experienced towards this wronged and afflicted lady.

"When I could no longer conceal from myself this truth which I have just avowed," she proceeded at length, but still with half-averted countenance, on which the blood mantled and then fled as abruptly again beneath the olive hue of her complexion,—"I resolved to seek him who is the father of the babe which I bear in my bosom. All hesitation vanished; my mind was made up. Thinking no more of revenge, but only of love and tenderness, I took my departure from Paris. This was in the beginning of March—and I proceeded into Germany. Being rich, Mr. Loftus—although you find me living in this close seclusion now—I had ample means to enable me to prosecute the search which I had undertaken. It was a search after a lover—and I had resolved if I succeeded in finding him, I would say, '*Return not to your own home in England; renounce it, abandon it for my sake! Was it not your own proposition at the time of my fall that I should dare public opinion to become your mistress openly? Now then do I call upon you to accept me in that light. It will cost you no pang to desert a wife whom you do not love for a mistress whom you have declared you adore. And, behold! I will place my fortune at your feet; all that I possess shall be yours. There is no sacrifice that I am not prepared to make for you, so that when my as yet unborn infant comes into the world it may at least be received in the arms of a father!*'—In the hope of finding him to whom I might thus address myself, did I travel throughout Germany; but I could obtain no trace of him. I passed into Italy. It was now the beginning of April; and at Milan I succeeded in hearing tidings of an individual exactly answering his description, but passing under a false name. Several months, I learnt, had elapsed since he was there; and on prosecuting my inquiries I discovered, beyond all possibility of mistake, that he was sedulously pursuing a rival with his addresses. Yes—he had been seen by domestics belonging to the hotel at which he resided——But wherefore need I enter into these particulars? Suffice it to say that I obtained the fullest proof of his infidelity; but following up the clue, I came on to Geneva. A fortnight only has elapsed since I arrived in this city, where, if additional evidence were wanting, I discovered enough to convince me that instead of abandoning myself to dreams of hope and love, 'tis for me to think either of despair or of vengeance. The unsettled state of France and Germany, in consequence of the return of Napoleon from Elba, has determined me to fix my abode for the present at Geneva. Here at least does tranquillity continue; and it does not appear probable that the peace of the little Republic will be disturbed, no matter what turn events may take in the north of Europe. I must inform you that on arriving at Geneva a fortnight ago, and on discovering those additional proofs of my noble lover's infidelity to which I have alluded, I was seized with so sudden and alarming an illness that it became necessary to summon medical aid. Dr. Maravelli was sent for; and of course he perceived my condition. To him did I make known my intention of remaining at Geneva; and I revealed to him enough of my history to enable him to understand that I sought seclusion for a few months while passing through the crowning ordeal of my disgrace. Accident had thus thrown me in the way of the very man who could provide me with the accommodation I required; for it appears that the doctor's house is one of retirement for ladies to whom such temporary seclusion becomes a matter of convenience or necessity. His chief patronesses, or rather patients, are foreign ladies who come hither from different parts, and even from distant quarters of Europe, to conceal their shame and endure its consequences beneath his roof. Now may you understand, Mr. Loftus, wherefore you find me in such a place. You can likewise comprehend why the doctor appealed to me for my consent ere he departed from the usual routine of his household arrangements by receiving you as a lodger. Had there been other ladies dwelling here at the present time, he would not perhaps have offered thus to accommodate you; but I am at this moment the only unhappy being of my sex located under such circumstances within these gloomy walls."

Again Mrs. Roberts paused; and for upwards of

a minute she preserved a deep silence, broken only by the sighs which convulsed her bosom.

"With regard to that incident—that dreadful incident," she resumed, "which made us acquainted this evening, and has rendered me indebted to you for my life—that most wretched life which you so nobly rescued——Oh! it was in a sudden paroxysm of despair that I sought death in the deep waters of Lake Leman. I had rambled forth to escape from the fearful dulness and awful monotony of this house; and while roving on the shores of Geneva's inland sea, I fell into a train of meditation more harrowing, more goading, more poignant than any to which I had lately yielded. I thought of what I once was and what I now am—how but a few months back I occupied an honourable, almost a brilliant position—and how I am now a lonely, friendless sojourner in a foreign clime! I thought of my wrongs—how much I had loved that man, how cruelly I had been deceived! But worst of all, I reflected that in a few months more I should give birth to a child on whom I could bestow no mother's fostering care—but whom, if it lived, I should have to abandon to the care of strangers; and that amongst those strangers must it be reared, never to know a parent's fondness nor endearing love! Oh! Mr. Loftus, naturally do I possess a good heart—a kind, loving, and affectionate disposition; and it was not therefore without emotion that I could contemplate the necessity of tearing myself away from the child who in a short time will see the light. It was this reflection that drove me to despair! Madness was in my brain—I felt as if I myself were an outcast, and that a curse would be entailed upon the head of my child if I suffered it to come into the world. Frantic—frenzied—banished as it were by the horror of my thoughts from the realms of hope, I resolved to put an end to my own wretched existence and terminate that of my yet unborn babe at the same time. But mine hour was not yet come; Providence interposed to save me—and you, my generous deliverer, were made the instrument of heaven's merciful and inscrutable purpose!"

The lady ceased: and covering her face with her hands, again she wept—and again was there a long interval of silence.

"You are now acquainted with as much as it is needful for you to know of my sad history," she said, at length breaking silence after a much longer pause than any previous one. "I would offer to assist you in the generous enterprise which you have in view: but I know not whether there be any way in which I can forward your aims."

Jocelyn, after thanking Mrs. Roberts for the proffer of assistance which she had just given, proceeded to describe in a brief manner the circumstances of his late imprisonment—thus accounting for the long delay which had occurred since he set out from England on his present mission; and without mentioning any names, he observed that the Princess was so surrounded by secret enemies and spies that he knew not how to obtain access to her.

"Can you not boldly present yourself at the villa to-morrow," asked Mrs. Roberts, "and demand an interview with her Royal Highness?"

"There are certain ladies in her household," returned Jocelyn, "who would hesitate at no means, however desperate, base, or unprincipled, in order to prevent me from obtaining access to her Royal Highness."

"Who are those ladies?" inquired Mrs. Roberts hastily, and as if prompted by a particular motive.

"Their name is Owen, and there are three sisters," was the respouse.

"Detested name!" ejaculated Mrs. Roberts: then, in a different tone, she added, "I have every reason to believe that one of those young ladies of whom you have spoken, is no very estimable pattern of morality and virtue—though heaven knows it is not for me to cast the first stone at her! But I should inform you—unless indeed you know it already—that the strangest, the most startling, indeed the most astounding rumours are prevalent in Geneva relative to her Royal Highness——"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Loftus: then as a sudden recollection struck him, he said, "I remember how peculiar and how mysterious was Maravelli's manner when I spoke to him on this same point at the village inn where we dined together this afternoon."

"Dr. Maravelli is acquainted with something relative to the villa, of a dark and mysterious character," observed Mrs. Roberts. "He has once or twice inadvertently let fall a hint to this effect; and although naturally a very cautious man, yet has he so far committed himself on one or two occasions, as to suffer me to perceive that he could reveal some startling secret if he chose."

"But concerning whom, and of what nature is that secret?" asked Loftus eagerly.

"Ah! *that* I cannot say. Dr. Maravelli has never entered into particulars—has never even manifested the slightest approach towards making me his confidant. Besides," added the lady, with dignity, "I should not think of encouraging a confidence calculated to place us on so familiar and intimate a footing. No—he has merely let slip a word or two in an unguarded moment—but enough, I repeat, to make me aware that he is acquainted with some secret which he could reveal if he chose."

"But the reports relative to the Princess," said Jocelyn inquiringly, "what is their nature?"

"All kinds of incredible things," replied Mrs. Roberts. "Indeed, I would not repeat them were it not absolutely necessary that you should know all that is said concerning her, and were it not also that you would be enabled to glean these things from other sources; for they are on the tip of every tongue, and scandal is busy enough with the Princess's name. In a word, 'tis said that she not only intrigues openly and unblushingly with her equerry Bergami, but that she scruples not to receive other lovers inside the walls of the villa—aye, and 'tis added, too, that she has even given birth to a child——"

"Heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Jocelyn, starting with mingled amazement and indignation. "What am I to think? Have I indeed embarked in the cause of a shameless wanton, and thus laid myself open to become the laughing stock of the whole world?—or is slander doing its detestable work?"

"Firmly and sincerely do I believe in the latter hypothesis," returned Mrs. Roberts. "Nevertheless, the whole affair is full of mystery. That one

of the young ladies bearing the name of Owen has admitted a lover——" and here the lady sighed deeply—"within the precincts of the villa, I have every reason to believe; and that therefore such conduct is but too well calculated to bring scandal upon that dwelling—a scandal indeed which by misapprehension and mistake may attach itself to the Princess herself, while it is all along only one of her dependants who is to blame——"

"Good God!" ejaculated Loftus, starting from his seat as if a flash of lightning suddenly thrilled through him from head to foot: "I understand it all! 'Tis the diabolical working-out of the conspiracy! Yes, yes—the truth stands revealed before me plain and transparent as it possibly can be! Madam," he abruptly exclaimed, turning towards Mrs. Roberts, "the construction you have so charitably placed upon the matter is the right one—and I solemnly assure you that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales is innocent of all and everything that scandal may impute unto her."

Mrs. Roberts gazed upon our hero with mingled astonishment and delight. Indeed, she forgot her own wrongs and her own sorrows in her joy to think that the injured wife of the Prince Regent not only possessed a champion who embraced her cause so fervently, but who was enabled to vindicate her character so confidently.

"Madam," said Loftus, observing the manner with which she surveyed him, "you have to a certain extent imparted your afflictions to me; and I will in return make known certain secrets to you. You have heard me speak of a conspiracy: I will explain what I mean—for I believe from certain things which you have said that you can assist me in the task I have in hand; and I feel assured that you possess the inclination to do so."

Jocelyn then proceeded to reveal all that he knew concerning the conspiracy on foot against the Princess, and of which the three Miss Owens were the instruments. Mrs. Roberts listened with surprise and indignation: but when our hero had concluded, she said with a peculiar emphasis, "After all, I am not astonished to hear that the Queen of England is one of the prime movers of this diabolical wickedness. I have all along suspected that she was capable of any treachery—any cruelty——"

But here Mrs. Roberts checked herself; and Loftus had too much delicacy to put any questions to her as to the opportunities she might have had of judging so minutely relative to the secret disposition of old Queen Charlotte.

For half-an-hour longer did the conversation last between Jocelyn and the lady; and it was past one o'clock when they quitted the drawing-room to return to their respective chambers.

CHAPTER CLII.

THE DOCTOR'S SECRET.

On the following morning Mrs. Roberts took her breakfast in her own room, she being much exhausted with the incidents of the preceding evening, and also on account of the late hour to which she had sat up. Loftus and Dr. Maravelli were accordingly alone together at table; and when the meal was over, our hero said to the physician, "I wish to have some conversation with you on a subject of a very delicate nature and of the utmost importance."

"With much pleasure," said the doctor, evidently not altogether unprepared for this intimation, especially after the hint which he had given Loftus on the preceding evening, to the effect that if he could be of any service to him his aid should be cheerfully afforded. "Come with me into my *sanctum*, where we can talk at greater ease, because secure against interruption."

He thereupon led the way into that little parlour which has been before described as fitted up in a manner so sombre as to wear quite a funeral appearance.

"Now, Dr. Maravelli," said Jocelyn, "I wish to treat you as a man of the world; and therefore I will at once frankly and candidly inform you that I believe you have it in your power to render me a service for which I am able and willing to pay handsomely. You must not imagine that because I am travelling humbly—unattended, and without any circumstance of pomp or show—that I am limited in my means: for even if my own resources did not enable me to do what is necessary in the carrying out of my plans, I should not find much difficulty in obtaining from other quarters the supplies needful for the purpose."

"And what is this service that you think I can render you?" asked Maravelli, inwardly chuckling at the preface with which our hero had introduced his business, and which seemed to promise large gains for the unprincipled physician.

"In your capacity, doctor," resumed Loftus, who saw in the twinkling of Maravelli's eye, the lurking devil which personifies the love of gold in the heart of man,—"you must frequently be called upon to exercise your professional skill under circumstances of great secrecy—and no doubt in proportion to the importance of the secret, is the fee placed in your hands?"

"I believe that all professional men are occasionally placed in such circumstances," remarked the doctor with a mysterious look.

"But *you* especially, within the walls of Geneva," said Jocelyn, "considering that you have this spacious establishment fitted up expressly for the accommodation of ladies who seek temporary retirement. The circumstance bespeaks you to be a man in whom confidence is placed; and therefore if ever there be a secret which can be hushed up at home, without the frail one being compelled to seclude herself for a while within these walls, *you* doubtless of all the medical men in Geneva are the one to be confided in under such circumstances?"

"You seem to understand my repute and my business well," said Maravelli, with a smile of still deeper meaning than before. "Now, there is something uppermost in your mind, to which all this is but a mere preface. Speak candidly at once. I *think* that we shall soon understand each other."

"Then, in plain terms," said Jocelyn, "if you will tell me what is the best paid secret which has recently been entrusted to you, I will give you double or treble the amount for the revelation."

"Gently!" said the doctor. "Again I may observe that I *think* we shall understand each other: but for me to reveal to you any secret at random, will not do. I have several secrets—secrets regard-

ing the happiness and deeply compromising the honour of divers noble families—Genevese, German, French, Italian, English—all which secrets are now locked up in my breast; and the very one which I may consider most important, might not be that which has the same value in your eyes. Besides, you are not asking through mere curiosity: you have a motive—and consequently there is one particular secret which you wish to know. Give me a clue."

"Did not our conversation yesterday afford you any insight with regard to my business at Geneva?" asked Jocelyn.

"Candidly speaking," replied Maravelli, "methought that you were somewhat pressing in your queries in regard to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales."

"Yes—and methought that you were likewise somewhat mysterious—I may say even *peculiar*, in the answers that you gave me."

"In what manner?" asked Maravelli.

"You surely can recollect what took place between us," rejoined Jocelyn. "You have spoken, as you informed me, on one occasion to two of the young ladies bearing the name of Owen: you also left upon my mind the impression that you had been within the walls of the villa; and your look intimated as plainly as the most eloquent looks are able, that you could state something if you chose which would soon put to flight all the elevated notions which I might have formed relative to the honour of the Princess of Wales. Tell me, did I read aright what was passing in your mind?"

"Yes—to a certain extent," answered Maravelli, but hesitatingly and guardedly.

"Now, it is my habit," resumed Jocelyn, "when having any particular clue to follow up through paths enveloped in gloom and beset with doubts and mysteries, to observe the minutest circumstances that may assist my investigation: or in plainer terms, by putting two and two together, I seldom fail at arriving at an accurate conclusion. Now, that *you*, Dr. Maravelli, are acquainted with some secret connected with the villa where the Princess resides, I am convinced. Then, when I find rumour declaring in bold and unmistakable terms that her Royal Highness has been guilty of great profligacies, and even privately given birth to a child, I ask myself who could confirm this tale if not Dr. Maravelli?"

Jocelyn looked steadily in the physician's face as he thus spoke; and again did he perceive that sinister twinkling in the eyes of the Genevese which denoted the heart's lust for gold. This very look at once served as a hint, although it was in reality the natural peeping forth of the man's character rather than an intentional development of it on his part. Jocelyn, however, at once profited thereby; and producing a pocket-book, he counted down Piedmont bank-notes to the value of two hundred louis d'or.

"You will not be offended with me, sir," he remarked, endeavouring to do the business in as delicate a way as possible, "if I offer this earnest of my liberal intentions towards you."

"I cannot feel offended—no—I cannot possibly be angry at such generosity," mumbled the physician. "But—I ought not—really I ought not—that is, I don't think—— But, however, I suppose that we *do* understand each other now:"—and thus speaking, the physician consigned the bank-notes to his pocket, with the evident st of one who is satisfying the strong craving of an insatiate passion. "That is just double the fee that I received from Mrs. Ranger," he thought within himself: then, fixing his eyes upon Jocelyn, he said, "It is indeed too true that her Royal Highness the English Princess became a mother a short time ago — barely three weeks — for I myself brought her child, which was still-born, into the world."

Loftus was staggered—and for a moment he certainly lost all faith in the possibility of the Princess's virtue: for this intelligence on the doctor's part was given with an assurance, a sincerity, and a solemnity that put his truthfulness almost beyond a doubt. But still Jocelyn had resolved to sift the matter to the very bottom: and veiling his emotions accordingly, he said, "Will you now explain to me all the circumstances under which this startling occurrence took place?"

Maravelli accordingly narrated to our hero those circumstances which are already known to the reader—how his services had been secured in advance by a liberal payment—how, when the night came, he had been conducted blind-folded to the place—how he was led up into a room where a lamp burnt dimly and feebly, draperies were carefully drawn over the window and around the bed, and his patient's head was completely enveloped in the folds of a thick black veil—how he had delivered this female of a still-born child—and how two young ladies, whom he had since recognised as two of the Miss Owens, had saluted the patient as "dearest and beloved Princess." He likewise added how, on issuing forth again, he had been left in the garden by Mrs. Ranger; and how he had heard the tread of footsteps, the sounds of voices, and the galloping-off of a post-chaise, which, filling him with terror, made him scale the wall and speed back to his own house.

"Then I am to understand, Dr. Maravelli," said Jocelyn, "that you raised the bandage and took a peep about the room to which you were so mysteriously introduced?"

"It is as you say," answered the physician. "Human nature could not have remained proof against such a temptation to gratify one's curiosity under such peculiar circumstances."

"But you did not all along obtain the slightest glimpse of the countenance of the lady occupying the bed—your patient, in a word?"

"No—I beheld not her countenance," was the reply.

"But you are sure that the two young ladies who entered and saluted her as *the Princess*, were two of the Misses Owen?"

"Yes—I am certain of it. From beneath the bandage I observed them sufficiently to know them again: and since then I have seen them walking upon the banks of the lake in attendance upon the Princess. I have even had the curiosity to ascertain their Christian names, and found that they were Miss Emma and Miss Julia."

"Well, and you also discovered that the female who managed all this mysterious business was a certain Mrs. Ranger?"

"Yes," returned Maravelli. "Her also did I observe in the room; and if you see her once it would be impossible not to know her again."

"One question more," said Jocelyn. "After all the precautions which were taken—or seemed to be taken—to prevent you from ascertaining that it was the Princess's villa, you were nevertheless suffered, when issuing forth again, to quit the garden by yourself? In plain terms, Mrs. Ranger left you, on the plea of looking after another woman to whom she had entrusted the dead child: and thus you were left alone to discover where it was you really were?"

"Yes," observed Maravelli. "But that part of the business belonged as it were to another adventure——"

"And that other adventure?" said Jocelyn, inquiringly. "Be pleased to tell me everything connected with the incidents of that night. In proportion to your candour shall my liberality be measured."

"I can really tell you little enough that is satisfactory on this head," replied Maravelli. "But listen attentively, Mr. Loftus. You must know, that being wedded to science, I from time to time purchase any *human fish* which two or three rogues belonging to the city hook up from the lake. I may add that I possess a sort of agency to supply certain German Universities with heads for phrenological study—real heads, you must understand, and not chalk ones—but heads which I embalm according to a valuable secret of my own. Well, Mr. Loftus——But I see you are looking at me with a strange expression——"

"Pray pardon me, and proceed," said our hero, who indeed had looked confused on being spoken to relative to those very heads whereof he had seen several specimens in the doctor's private room, during the previous night.

"Well, I merely mentioned those little facts," continued Maravelli, "in order to explain how it happens that I have any acquaintance at all with three such villanous ruffians as Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden: for those are the fishers of men to whom I alluded—and they are likewise fellows ever ready to do whatsoever service is well paid, no matter for it's nature. These men, then, it appears from what they have since told me during a conversation I had with them, were hired by two English gentlemen named Smith and Thompson to carry off a couple of ladies, from the villa, on the very night of which I have been speaking—and that same night, you understand, on which my services were put in requisition. But it would appear that Kobolt and his comrades carried off the wrong females—indeed none others than Mrs. Ranger and the very woman having charge of the dead child. Hence the sudden disappearance of Mrs. Ranger when she left me in the garden in the manner I have described. The two Englishmen, it appears, had gone to Lausanne; and there a ludicrous scene took place, when the two elderly dames were brought into their presence."

"But how know you that the other woman taken with Mrs. Ranger was the one to whom the child had been entrusted? Because those men—Kobolt, and the others of whom you speak—could not have known all this."

"No—assuredly not," returned Maravelli: "but Mrs. Ranger called upon me a few evenings after the incidents that had taken place, and hinted to me what had occurred on the memorable occasion in question. She said that as now I of course knew it was the Princess's villa to which I had been taken, she had only to add her prayers and entreaties to any other inducement which I had already received to keep the secret, as I must now be more than ever aware of its immense importance."

"Did Mrs. Ranger happen to mention the name of that woman of whom you have been speaking?" asked Jocelyn.

"Yes—she said it was Hubbard—Mrs. Hubbard, the laundress in the household of her Royal Highness."

"And the two Englishmen who called themselves Smith and Thompson?" said Jocelyn, more than half suspecting that these very convenient names were only assumed ones—but by whom and for what purpose he of course could not imagine. "Did you ever see them?"

"Not to my knowledge," returned Maravelli.

"And about the still-born child," asked Jocelyn: "what became of it?"

"Ah! that question reminds me," exclaimed the doctor, "that there is another little incident growing out of the adventures of that night—an incident which has come to my knowledge by a side-wind, and which may probably account for the manner wherein the infant corpse was disposed of."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Jocelyn: "your budget of information is even more capacious than I had expected. I am sure you have already given me two hundred louis' worth of intelligence. Here is another hundred louis, therefore, for what you are about to impart to me."

"Upon my word, you justify the opinion so invariably entertained relative to the generosity of Englishmen," said Maravelli, as he took up the bank-notes which Jocelyn had just counted down upon the table: and having consigned them to his pocket, he continued to observe, "Mr. Loftus, I am still speaking of the night of memorable incidents—and here is another episode in that night's history. Behold, a young lady was arrested on the margin of the lake, between two and three o'clock in the morning, by a posse of police-officers, who were lying in wait for the fishers of men, and who were suddenly alarmed by a splash in the water. The young lady was taken before the night-commissary; and to him she gave her name—*Emma Owen!* Her story was that she went out for a ramble, and that in a listless mood she flung a stone into the water. The magistrate ordered her to find bail: she accordingly sent for a linen-draper with whom she dealt; and he at once proceeded to the police-station and entered into the required surety. He happens to be a cousin of mine; and hence my knowledge of the transaction. I now leave you to judge, Mr. Loftus, for yourself, what Miss Emma Owen was doing at the side of the lake within two or three hours after the accouchement, and what that splash was which attracted the notice of the police-officers."

"Will you favour me with the name and address of this linen-draper?" asked Loftus.

"Heavens! I hope we are not going to have any exposure in all these things," exclaimed Maravelli, now evidently frightened. "Remember that according to the laws of Geneva, it is branding with a red hot iron and ten years' imprisonment for any surgeon who privately and secretly assists in the

accouchement of a woman, and who fails to have the birth, place, hour, and all particulars, duly registered. Besides, even if the authorities, out of consideration for a lady of the Princess's royal rank, should pass the matter over in silence—yet, were it merely whispered that I had in any way betrayed the confidence reposed in me, I should lose all the patronage whereby I live, and I might shut up my establishment at once."

"Dr. Maravelli," said Jocelyn, who had listened with the utmost attention to these remonstrances, "rest assured that you shall not suffer on account of all this. I cannot explain to you my motives in penetrating into the affair: but you may be certain that no harm shall befall you. Now then, the linen-draper's name—and here is another hundred louis."

"Oh! you are too good—you are too generous," said Maravelli, no longer thinking of the danger which had ere now alarmed him, but consigning the notes to his pocket. "Here is the name!"—and he wrote it down upon a piece of paper.

"Now, one word more," said Jocelyn.

"Stop!" exclaimed Maravelli, as something struck him. "Without compromising me in the least, you might ascertain all the particulars of this little episode relating to Miss Emma Owen. The night-commissary must have duly made an entry thereof in the Police-book, which you can inspect for a franc. The whole series of adventures happened about three weeks ago."

"Thanks for this additional information," said Jocelyn. "And now the *one word more* that I alluded to! Where, in case of need, can I find these men, Kobolt and his companions, of whom you have been speaking?"

"If any time after dark you walk on the shores of the lake, near the old jetty, you will be pretty sure to encounter three ill-looking fellows: or if

you particularly wish to see them in a more private manner, I can tell you the tavern which they are in the habit of frequenting."

At this moment a knock was heard at the room-door; and Mavolta entered with the announcement that the doctor's presence was immediately required at an hotel much frequented by foreign visitors, especially the English. He thereupon sallied forth; and Jocelyn proceeded to his own chamber where he sat down to pen a letter to his Louisa and also to reflect upon the course which he should now pursue in consequence of the many important revelations he had just received from Dr. Maravelli.

In this manner he whiled away the time till mid-day, when he repaired to the drawing-room,—Mrs. Roberts having given him to understand on the preceding night that she would be there at that hour. Nor did she now fail to keep the appointment: and he accordingly found her seated upon the sofa in that apartment.

A dead pallor sat upon the olive hue of her skin, making her seem as if she had recently been very ill. She also looked languid and weak; and it was but too evident that she had sustained a severe shock from the immersion in the water and the excitement she had undergone, in her delicate situation, on the preceding evening. She endeavoured, however, to smile cheerfully as she gave our hero her hand: but he could not help saying, "I am afraid you are very ill?"

"I do indeed feel more severely to-day than I did last night, the effects of my rash and wicked attempt at self-destruction," answered Mrs. Roberts: "but I shall be better to-morrow. I promised you last night that I would repair to-day to the villa, and endeavour to obtain an interview with her Royal Highness; but I am afraid I must postpone this visit until to-morrow, when I shall no doubt be better. Indeed, unless you are very impatient, I can faithfully promise you that to-morrow your letter shall be delivered to her Royal Highness."

"I could not think of pressing you to undertake a task for which you are evidently so unfitted to-day," said Jocelyn.

He then proceeded to inform Mrs. Roberts how he had succeeded in worming out of Dr. Maravelli so many important secrets connected with the villa: but when he mentioned the names of *Mr. Thompson* and *Mr. Smith* as those of the two Englishmen who had hired Kobolt and his gang to carry off the two females to Lausanne, he noticed that Mrs. Roberts became much affected. She trembled violently and burst into tears. Then, remembering all she had said on the preceding night relative to her faithless lover and one of the Miss Owens, it instantaneously struck him that either Smith or Thompson was the feigned name under which that noble seducer of her's had travelled on the Continent.

"I see that you have divined what is passing in my thoughts," she said, gazing upon Jocelyn through her tears. "And now I can full well understand that it becomes important for you to ascertain all that you can, relative to that intrigue between my faithless lover and Julia Owen."

"It is indeed of importance," said Jocelyn; "because from all that I told you last night it is probable that, faithful to the vile mission which they have received from the arch-conspirators in London, these Owens have managed to throw the guilt, the scandal, and the dishonour of their profligacy upon the Princess. It is important, then, as you will see, madam, that I should glean every possible evidence to prove that profligacy on the part of either or all of those Miss Owens."

"You have naught to do, Mr. Loftus," said the lady, "but repair to the Town-hall, examine the Police-book, and ascertain where the individual named Thompson lived when at Geneva. You can then follow up your inquiries at the place so indicated and perhaps you may glean much important information concerning him.

"And Mr. Smith the same?" said Jocelyn.

"Alas! I am in a position to tell you certain particulars relative to *him*," resumed the lady, with a profound sigh: "for *he* is the treacherous one of whom I have been speaking. Here then is the address of the lodging which he occupied when at Geneva. If you go to the house, you will be received by a young and beautiful girl—one of those models of true Genevese loveliness—but who, alas! is gradually becoming the mere wreck of her former self. That this sad change is taking place in her, is but too evident—even to the eye of one who never saw her ere the blight of sorrow had fallen upon her cheeks. Did I not tell you last night," continued Mrs. Roberts, with a strong accentuation of bitterness, "that on pursuing my inquiries *here*—within the walls of Geneva—I learnt enough to put to flight all dreams of love and hope, and make me think only of vengeance? For that treacherous one who scrupled not to make a moment's plaything and toy of me, and then tossed me ignominiously away, has done the same by this poor Genevese girl. Nay, his conduct has even been more flagitious towards her than in respect to myself: for *I* knew that he was married, and I fell therefore with my eyes open. Yes, mine was the guilt of sheer profligacy: and its punishment was merited! But that poor girl, placing full reliance upon the word of an Englishman, believed that he was unmarried; and little dreaming that he was of a lordly rank and so highly placed above her, she surrendered herself to his honour—but in the hope of becoming his wife. During the last month of his residence at Geneva, he was frequently absent from his lodging for the whole night; and though at first his excuses satisfied the girl, she at length grew jealous. So she followed him—kept a watch about the villa—and gleaned unmistakable proof that he was carrying on an intrigue with Miss Julia Owen. But still the poor Genevese girl said nothing to her seducer: for she was afraid of angering him, and she trembled lest he should seek some subterfuge for not fulfilling his pledge to her—that pledge the fulfilment whereof she stood so much in need to save her honour! But all on a sudden her seducer's precipitate departure from Geneva filled her with despair: and now, as I have ere now told you, Mr. Loftus, she is a sinking wreck, though still retaining all the evidences of remarkable beauty. But even in three weeks has affliction worked fearful inroads upon her——Ah! no wonder: for if my heart be nearly broken, experienced as I am in the ways of the world, what must be the feelings of this unhappy girl, so innocent, so full of gaiety and joy, until she became his prey!"

"Alas! poor girl," said Jocelyn, deeply touched by this narrative. "You know my reasons for remaining in-doors to-day—indeed until the letter which I bear from England shall be safe in the hands of the Princess——"

"You are afraid of being seen and recognized by any one attached to the household of her Royal Highness; the result of which knowledge of your presence in Geneva would only be to cause the multiplication of all imaginable precautions to ward off the approach of any friendly-disposed person to the presence of the Princess."

"Yes—those are the reasons which induce me to remain in the house to-day," said Jocelyn: "but to-night, so soon as it is dusk, I will issue forth and institute the necessary inquiries relative to the individual who bore the name of *Thompson*."

"And you will also do well to call at the other lodging and see that poor girl," said Mrs. Roberts. "She may probably tell you even more than she told me, concerning the villany, the perfidy, and the profligacy of her seducer. But now that I bethink me," she suddenly exclaimed, "there can be no need for me to exhibit the slightest want of confidence towards you, since you have placed such full trust in me. I will therefore tell you my real name—likewise that of the perfidious nobleman who has been the author of my unhappiness and who under the name of *Mr. Smith*——"

But here Mrs. Roberts was interrupted by the entrance of Dr. Maravelli, who burst somewhat abruptly into the room, on his return from the visit to which he had been summoned.

"Now, my dear madam," he exclaimed, "you will have a companion at last. I thought it impossible that my establishment could remain much longer with only one lady-lodger. Another will be here presently, recommended to me also from the very same hotel where I had the honour of first forming your acquaintance. I have explained to her that I have a gentleman lodging in my house," added the doctor, turning towards Loftus as he thus spoke: "and she has made no objection."

"I am glad for your sake, madam," said our hero, addressing himself to Mrs. Roberts, "that you will thus have a companion."

"And a very agreeable one, too, I fancy," cried Dr. Maravelli. "She is a fellow-countrywoman of yours—a thorough lady—beautiful in person, fascinating in manners, and with one of the sweetest voices I ever heard in my life."

"At all events you are drawing a charming picture, doctor," said Mrs. Roberts, forcing herself to smile: for she never chose to appear *too* unhappy in Maravelli's presence.

"Perhaps you will have the kindness, my dear madam," continued the doctor, "to receive the lady when she comes. I think it always better that a stranger should be met in the first instance by one of her own sex—and that they should also be left alone together for a few hours, so that they may become well acquainted and get on a friendly kind of footing with each other. Perhaps therefore, madam," he added, "you and Mrs. Montague—for that is the name the lady chooses to be known by—will pass the remainder of the day alone together in the drawing-room; while Mr. Loftus and I take our dinner and wine *tête-à-tête*, as we did yesterday at the village-inn."

The suggestions of Dr. Maravelli were at once agreed to; and Jocelyn was accordingly prevented for the remainder of that day from finding an opportunity of renewing his private conversation with Mrs. Roberts. The interval till dinner-time he passed in his own chamber, reading some books which the doctor lent him; and when at five in the evening he was summoned to the dining-room, he learnt from the physician that Mrs. Montague had duly arrived, accompanied by her lady's-maid, in the course of the afternoon, and that she was with Mrs. Roberts in the drawing-room.

Loftus sat an hour with the doctor at table, and then returned to his books to while away another three hours until it was dusk. This was at about nine o'clock, at which hour he issued forth from Dr. Maravelli's establishment, to institute certain inquiries necessary for the carrying out of his mission with regard to the Princess of Wales.

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In the meantime—and very shortly after Jocelyn had left Mrs. Roberts in the drawing-room, in the forenoon, according to the suggestion of Dr. Maravelli—the new lodger, Mrs. Montague, arrived at the establishment and was received by the physician. She was accompanied by her lady's-maid, and was evidently of rank and distinction, as she was assuredly of great personal beauty. In none of these particulars had the doctor at all exaggerated.

Mavolta, being likewise in attendance, at once escorted Mrs. Montague to the drawing-room: but the moment she threw open the door and the eyes of the new-coming English lady encountered those of Mrs. Roberts who had risen from her seat to receive her, each started with the suddenness of an amazed recognition. Mavolta did not observe what thus passed, but closing the door behind Mrs. Montague, left her and Mrs. Roberts alone together.

"Is it possible?" exclaimed one.

"And I also ask is it possible?" cried the other.

Then there was a pause—a very awkward pause of upwards of a minute, during which the two ladies evidently knew not exactly what course to pursue towards each other. But at length Mrs. Roberts advanced, extending her hand, and saying, "We meet under circumstances that should quench all hostile feeling."

"Agreed," returned Mrs. Montague, and they shook hands accordingly.

But here we must leave them, for the present, to discuss their several grievances, compare notes of their plans—and in a word indulge in those reciprocal outpourings of confidence which were so natural with two females in their condition.

CHAPTER CLIII.

THE FISHERS OF MEN.

Having engaged a *fiacre*, or vehicle answering in description to a London hackney-coach, Jocelyn proceeded in the first instance to the Town Hall, where he made inquiries relative to the lodging which a certain *Mr. Thompson*, an English gentle-

man, had occupied while recently sojourning in Geneva. It being what would be called in England "after office-hours," our hero had to pay double fees for the search, to which he of course did not object; and in a few minutes the clerk in charge of the registry gave him a slip of paper containing the information which he required. But as he put the slip into Jocelyn's hand, the official asked, "Is this all you desire to know concerning Mr. Thompson?"

"I wish to ascertain all I can concerning him," replied Jocelyn; "and if you can give me any additional particulars, I shall most cheerfully and liberally remunerate you for your trouble."

Thus speaking, he laid two louis upon the table; and the clerk, after consigning them to his pocket, unlocked a cupboard—took out a bulky volume—and opening it at the letter T, searched for the name of *Thompson*.

"It appears to be a very common name with your fellow-countrymen, sir," he remarked, with a smile: "for a large number of English visiting Geneva are called Thompson. I have observed, too, it is the same with Smith, and Jones, and Brown, and Green, and White: but I think that of all, the Smiths predominate."

"There is no doubt a great number of Englishmen bearing those names," said Loftus: "but it must also be observed that whenever an Englishman, no matter how fine a name his real one may be, wishes to take a false one, he is sure to fix on the commonest and ugliest."

"Ah! indeed—is it so?" said the clerk, who, like all Genevese, was fond of a gossip. "Well, sometimes we find out that Englishmen visiting Geneva are travelling with false names: but so long as our attention is not openly and officially directed to the matter, we wink at it. The English, you see, sir, spend a great deal of money at Geneva: their presence is good for our trade—and we like to encourage them here. They may therefore take what names they like, so long as they do not violate the laws. At the same time, I must inform you that all particulars we *do* succeed in gleaning concerning them, we place on record: or else," he added with a sly laugh, "we should not have such a Police-book as this to refer to when occasion may require. But, Ah! here is the Thompson concerning whom you have been inquiring, the last Englishman of that name who has visited Geneva: and you will perceive that there is a pretty long note appended to *his* name."

Our hero looked at the place to which the official pointed, and observed that there was indeed a lengthy annotation, consisting of such curt, broken, but very significant sentences as the following:—

"Came from Italy—had been seen at Milan—supposed to be secretly following the English Princess's retinue—is well provided with money—evidently has no political aim in view—has been recognised by an English traveller as a Colonel Malpas—said not to bear a very high character in his own country—lives secluded and retired here—shuns notice, avoids society, pays his way regularly—goes out at night—lurks about the English Princess's villa—has been seen to scale the wall—was watched on two or three occasions—found to have passed the night within the villa—orders given not to molest him—no desire to create a scandal—departed suddenly—left no debts unpaid."

"And that is all," said the clerk, when he had read these notes over to our hero.

Loftus then requested to be favoured with any private information that the book might afford relative to a *Mr. Smith* who had also been recently staying at Geneva: and having paid another fee he was allowed to inspect the following record:—

"Came from Italy, through Savoy—supposed to be keeping on the track of the English Princess and her retinue—is known to be an English nobleman of high rank, the Earl of Curzon—travelling with passport made out in name of Smith—believed to have no political aim or object—mere affair of gallantry—plenty of money—lives in closest seclusion—seen loitering near the villa—frequent appointments with some lady dwelling there—the police-spy, set to watch, unable to discover who the lady is—dared not venture close enough—the Earl observed to scale the garden-wall—passed whole nights at the villa—opinion confirmed that it is a mere intrigue of gallantry—no notice to be taken—not to be interfered with—departed without leaving any debts."

Having ascertained these particulars,—which, we should observe, were rendered as complete as possible by means of specific dates,—Jocelyn Loftus took his departure from the Town Hall; and re-entering the hackney-coach, he ordered it to drive to the neighbourhood of the lake.

While proceeding thither, he reflected on all the details he had just gleaned from the secret registry of police. The self-styled Mr. Thompson was Colonel Malpas; and Mr. Smith was the Earl of Curzon. It was the Earl of Curzon, then, who was the faithless lover of Mrs. Roberts. But how completely identical appeared to be the objects which those two individuals had in view while visiting the Continent! *Both* were secretly following in the track of the Princess of Wales: *each* was intriguing with a lady in her household! That the Earl's affair of gallantry was with Julia Owen, Loftus was already aware. Considering, then, everything he knew concerning the Misses Owen, was it not natural to infer that *another* of the sisters was the object of Malpas's intrigue? And, in pursuance of the detestable mission which those girls had received, was it not probable enough that while gratifying their passions on the one hand, they at the same time on the other hand artfully contrived to throw all the scandal of their amours upon the Princess? Were not *they* guilty—and was not the Princess innocent and unsuspecting?

Such were the conclusions to which Jocelyn naturally came: and the reader does not require to be informed how correct those surmises were. But while thus pondering on the details he had gleaned from the secret registry of police and the deductions he had thence drawn, he could not help experiencing a sensation of disgust and loathing to think that the actions of individuals should be so minutely watched, even to the compromise of female reputations, by the myrmidons of the Genevese law. He also remarked, in the course of his meditations, that the Police-book did not seem to have contained any memorandum of the hiring of Kobolt and his gang to carry off the two females from the villa; and it was therefore to be supposed that the police had remained altogether in the

dark upon the subject. As for the two ladies whom Malpas and Curzon really intended to have carried off on that occasion, who could they be if not two of the Miss Owens?

While thus pursuing his reflections, our hero reached the vicinage of the lake; and dismissing the hackney-coach, he walked down to the bank of that inland sea. It was now near eleven o'clock: the night was tolerably clear above, for the moon was shining: but a mist hung upon the water and the surrounding shore, involving all the features of the lake in obscurity.

Advancing along the margin of the water, Loftus presently reached an old jetty which was the index of the very spot for which he was searching, in pursuance of the hint he had received from Maravelli. The gloom was now deepening—the mist from the lake increasing in density and spreading so rapidly all around and high above, that the pure azure of the heaven was veiled and the moon was at length only seen dimly like a pale lamp that is extinguishing. Jocelyn paused near the jetty and listened: but no sound save the rippling of the waters met his ear. For upwards of ten minutes did he remain, leaning against one of the huge piles of the jetty, wondering to himself whether Kobolt and his men would come thither that night. At length, finding that no one approached, he thought that he would return to Maravelli's and seek them on the following night at the public-house where they were accustomed to meet, and which the physician had proposed to indicate to him. But just as he was about to quit the spot where he had been standing, he heard the sounds of approaching footsteps and at once passed underneath the jetty. Three men soon emerged from the deepening gloom, carrying some ominous-looking implements over their shoulders; and Jocelyn at once felt convinced these were the individuals whom he sought. But wishing to make sure, he remained silent and motionless where he was to watch their proceedings.

Speaking but little, and this little in a flash language utterly incomprehensible to our hero, the three men went to work without loss of time. Mounting the pier, they threw in their dragging-implements,—for such was the tackle they had brought upon their shoulders;—and after several ineffectual hauls, an ejaculation of satisfaction broke from the lips of one of them. Jocelyn, at no loss to conjecture the meaning of the cry, peeped forth; and as at that very moment a sudden breeze—almost amounting to a squall—swept over the lake, causing the mist to part asunder as it were, the moon broke forth in the full power of its light, and the silvery beams fell upon the face of a corpse which the fishers of men were dragging to the surface of the water.

Our hero recoiled from the ghastly spectacle; and at the same instant a terrible imprecation burst from the three men. The corpse had broken away from their tackle, the squall having suddenly produced a strong current round the pier-head.

Jocelyn now showed himself, and called to the three men to come down. Starting at the appearance of our hero, they at first seemed to hesitate: but when, in the French language, he declared that he was alone and that he had no hostile intent, the fellows hastily descended from the top of the piles.

"Who the deuce are you?" demanded the foremost, who was decidedly entitled to carry off the palm of villanous looks from his companions, vile as their appearance also was. "Are you a spy? do you mean suicide? or are you a sleep-walker?"

"I am none of all these," said our hero, with the calmness of true courage.

"Then what do you here, young man?" demanded the ill-looking fellow.

"I am in search of a person named Kobolt," said Jocelyn boldly.

"Ah!" was the man's ejaculation: "do you want him for good or for evil—to do him a mischief or to make his services available? because it may be that I can help you to an interview with him; but all depends on your answer to the questions I have just put."

"My object is by no means a hostile one," said Jocelyn, "but will put many louis into Kobolt's pocket. One word more—Dr. Maravelli gave me the hint that I should find Kobolt here; and now you may as well admit that *you* are the man."

The fellow looked slowly around, plunging his eyes with keen and straining penetration into the depths of the mist, which had now closed over the lake again, to ascertain whether there were any policemen on the watch at a distance: then, evidently satisfied on this head, he observed, "Well, I *am* Kobolt: and these," he added, as his two companions came more forward, "are Hernani and Walden."

"Which names," said Jocelyn, as the two villanous-looking countenances were now as completely disclosed to his view as that of the foremost individual, "were likewise mentioned to me by Dr. Maravelli."

"Well, we have no reason to doubt your good faith," said Kobolt, fixing his eyes piercingly upon our hero. "You are a good-looking youth, and scarcely seem capable of treachery. Come, let us stand beneath the jetty. It is useless to run a risk of being seen. But you are an Englishman—eh? Well, I thought so by the look of you; and I am all the better pleased, because we pick up an occasional job from Englishmen, and have experienced moreover that they pay well."

Thus speaking, Kobolt passed underneath the jetty, accompanied by his two confederates and followed by Jocelyn. And now they were enveloped in almost total darkness, so that they could indeed converse without fear of observation, should any one approach along the border of the lake. Loftus entertained no apprehension on finding himself in this lonely spot and in the deep obscurity, along with such desperate men: for in the first place fear was unknown to him; and secondly he knew full well that if they wished to make away with him, they could as easily do it by the side of the jetty as under it.

"You have just observed that you sometimes find employment from English persons," said Jocelyn. "Perhaps you remember that about three weeks ago you were engaged to carry off two ladies from a certain villa?"

"Yes," exclaimed Kobolt: "a villa in the neighbourhood here. But you were not one of the gentlemen who hired us?"

"No," observed Hernani the Italian: "I'll swear that he was not one of them. He's a prettier-

looking fellow, though they were both handsome enough."

"I did not for a moment wish you to infer that I was one of them," remarked Jocelyn. "But what I require is that you relate to me every detail and particular connected with that affair whereof we are speaking."

"Before we do so," said Kobolt, "there are two little preliminaries to be fulfilled. The first is for you to tell us why you wish to ascertain these particulars at all; and the second is to afford us a proof that you know how to reward handsomely as well as to catechise closely."

"In respect to the first condition which you have set forth," returned Jocelyn, "it must suffice for you to know that you will not in the slightest degree endanger yourselves by giving me the information I seek: and secondly, I have twenty louis set apart for you in my waistcoat-pocket. Here, give me your hand, Kobolt; and I will count them into your palm."

"This is business-like," said Walden, the Switzer. Nothing like Englishmen for doing things in a business-like manner."

"You can go into the light," said Jocelyn, when he had given Kobolt the money, "and satisfy yourself that they are all good gold pieces."

"The chink is enough for me," observed the ruffian, as he made the coin jingle in his hand: then consigning it to his pocket, he continued thus: —"Some weeks ago an English gentleman, who gave the name of Smith——wasn't it Smith, Hernani?"

"Just so," was the reply. "Nine Englishmen out of every ten are named Smith."

"Well then, this Monsieur Smith managed to introduce himself to us—no matter how—and after a time he engaged us for a particular business. We were to get a post-chaise and four horses to carry off two ladies from the English Princess's villa. One lady was to be walking inside the grounds in one particular spot—the other also inside the grounds, but at another spot. We were to seize upon them—seal their lips—not with kisses," added the fellow, chuckling coarsely: "no, no—the gentlemen were to do *that*—but with our hands; and we were told not to damage their sweet lips and beautiful teeth——"

"Ah! then you were led to believe that the two ladies were young and beautiful?" said Loftus.

"So we fancied," returned Kobolt: "but we made a sad mistake. In a word, we carried off two females from the very places pointed out to us: but they turned out to be two elderly hags. Well, as there are many different ideas about beauty, and as we didn't exactly know what English taste might be, we resolved to keep possession of the old ladies—particularly as we had found them each in the very spot pointed out by our employers. But when we got to Lausanne, by the Saints! what a scene ensued. It was indeed a mistake from beginning to end; and so there was nothing left to do but to bring the old ladies back again. This we did, having been assured that we should not be troubled in the matter: and sure enough we never have heard any more of the business in any shape or way."

"So far, so good," said Jocelyn: "and now will you be pleased to inform me whether, during the last three weeks—indeed, ever since that particular night—you have experienced any peculiar good luck in your avocation as fishers of men?"

"To tell you the truth," answered Kobolt, "this is the first time we have resumed our fishing occupation since that very night whereof we have been speaking: and for this seeming idleness on our part there have been two reasons. The first is, we heard that a watch had been set for us by the police, and so we thought we would rest awhile till we found the coast clear again: and secondly, we were so well paid by your fellow-countrymen Smith and Thompson, that we could afford to give ourselves a holiday for a short time."

"Well, and now there need be no farther delay in continuing your night's sport," returned our hero.

"Perdition!" ejaculated Hernani: "the young gentleman wishes to see us at our work."

"Or else," added Walden, "he wants to become one of us."

"Hold your tongues!" growled Kobolt, savagely: "the gentleman has some other and deeper meaning. Now, sir, what is it? Let us be frank with each other."

"I have no objection," rejoined Jocelyn. "Know then, that I have some reason to believe the corpse of a child—a new-born infant—was thrown into the lake close by this very jetty about three weeks ago. From what I have understood it was wrapped in a flannel that was carefully tied around it——"

"And you want it fished up for some reason or another?" said Kobolt interrogatively. "Well, if it was sunk with a stone or anything heavy, it is no doubt at the bottom still: for whatever gets into what may be called the little bay on either side of the jetty, always remains there."

"Well," said Jocelyn, "let us waste no more time in words. You liked the chink of those twenty louis so well that you would doubtless be pleased to finger another twenty. You shall do so if you drag me up the corpse of that child!"

The three men exchanged amongst themselves a few low and rapidly-whispered observations in their peculiar *argot*, or slang-language, which, as we have above stated, was utterly incomprehensible to our hero. This discourse only lasted for a minute; and when it was over, Kobolt, again addressing Loftus in the French tongue, said, "Your request about this child is so extraordinary that I and my companions hesitate to proceed farther unless you give us some explanation. The truth is, it is like advancing in the dark. We do not see into what trouble we might get ourselves; and though we are no cowards, and not over particular what we do as long as we are well paid, yet we do not exactly choose to walk blindfold over a precipice."

"I shall assuredly give you no explanations at all," said Loftus. "If the corpse be found, I pay you for it and take it away with me. Whatever danger may result, will accrue only unto me; and I am prepared to encounter it. But I do not wish you to proceed farther unless you choose. Wait until to-morrow night; and in the meantime ask Dr. Maravelli whether I am trustworthy. Then, if despite the answer you receive from him, you should still hesitate, I can but purchase drags and come and *fish*, as you call it, on my own account."

Again did the three men converse together in

their own flash tongue; and at the end of this second consultation, Kobolt exclaimed, "Well, we have made up our minds to run any risk there may be in this business."

Having thus spoken, he emerged forth from beneath the jetty, followed by his two accomplices and our hero. Deep was the obscurity which prevailed, and which had now well nigh absorbed the moonlight altogether. But still there was a certain hazy glimmering upon the water; and Jocelyn closely watched the preparations which the men made for their fishing experiments. They had two kinds of tackle. One was a net made in the shape of a bag, and fastened to a large hoop, to which were attached four cords, joining together at the length of about a dozen feet: and at this point of junction they were united to one good stout rope. The other sort of tackle consisted of a row of grappling irons fastened to a bar of wood about four feet long; and with this instrument the bottom of the lake might be as it were raked, so as to catch hold of anything that had even become embedded in the mud or clay.

With these two distinct apparatus three or four fresh hauls were now made,—the men either wading out to their middle in the water, or else climbing along the cross-beams on the side of the jetty, so as to be enabled to fling their tackle as far away from the land as possible, and thus drag the whole of the little bay formed by the wooden pier and the indented shore.

Little was said during the half-hour at first expended in this manner: but presently an exclamation from Kobolt, as he raised the net above described, drew the notice of his comrades and Jocelyn towards him.

"Here is something very much like it!" he said, as he proceeded to examine the net: and from amidst a quantity of weeds, stones, and mire, he dragged forth a shapeless object which he at once pronounced to be the corpse of an infant wrapped up in flannel.

One of the men now produced a piece of canvass, which made a fitting envelope for the corpse, to secure our hero's hand against too close a contact with the loathsome object. He now paid Kobolt the remaining twenty louis according to promise, and took his departure with his strange—we might almost say dreadful burthen.

Uninterruptedly and free from molestation, did our hero retrace his way to Maravelli's house, the exact position of which with regard to the lake he had not much difficulty in remembering, having been led thither direct from the water's edge (although considerably lower down) by Mrs. Roberts on the preceding night.

On reaching his temporary place of abode, he was admitted by the physician himself, who generally answered the bell at late hours; and when the front door was closed, Loftus said, "Let me at once enter your private room—and take care that no one intrudes."

"Every one in the house has retired to rest save you and me," said the doctor. "But what, in heaven's name, have you there?" he asked.

"You shall see," returned our hero: and he hastened into the little sombre-looking parlour, followed by Maravelli.

"Ah! I can now guess what you have been about," said the latter, with a frightened look. "You have found the fishers of men—they have fished for you to some purpose. But what on earth is the meaning of all this? what mischief is brewing? Speak—let me know the worst!"—and the doctor trembled all over, as if shaking with the palsy, while the pallor of death overspread his countenance.

"I have already told you," said Jocelyn, in an earnest voice, "that you have nothing to fear on my account. No harm shall befall you, provided you do everything that I require at your hands. I am not warring against you: I have no personal enmity towards you. On the contrary, I have already given you a guarantee of my ability and desire to recompense you."

"With these assurances I am tranquillized," said the physician.

While this colloquy was going on, Jocelyn had placed his burthen upon the table, and had loosened the canvass wrapper. It now appeared that a large stone was tied in a white cambric handkerchief round the neck of the dead infant. This Jocelyn removed, and then unrolled the flannel that had enveloped the corpse. Its face was horribly disfigured, and was not distinguishable as the countenance of a human being. But upon this we will not dwell. Loathsome indeed was the object; and Jocelyn's repugnance to meddle with it, or to think of keeping it for any time instead of at once consigning it to the earth, was only overruled by a conviction that the proceeding was one of imperious necessity and vitally important to the success of the great enterprise which he had in view.

But to continue. In order to proceed with his investigation, it was necessary to procure a basin of water wherein to soak the cambric handkerchief by which the stone was attached, and the flannel garment in which the corpse had been enveloped—so completely covered, or indeed saturated, with slimy mud were they. This being done, Loftus proceeded to examine the cambric handkerchief; and in one of the corners he found the initials E. O.

"*Emma Owen!*" he said, as he pointed them out to Maravelli. "And you are a witness, doctor, in case of necessity, that this handkerchief was attached to the corpse."

"Yes," returned the medical man, hesitatingly. "But heaven send that there shall be no need for any witnesses to give their testimony at all."

"Rest assured that I will manage every thing in a manner to avoid scandal and exposure," said Loftus, much to the physician's satisfaction at this reiterated promise of impunity. "Now for the flannel garment," added our hero: and after closely examining this article, he said, "Doctor, what are these initials?"

"A. O.," replied the physician, easily deciphering the letters.

"*Agatha Owen!*" said Loftus.

"Then—perhaps," exclaimed Maravelli, a light now suddenly breaking in upon him, "you do not believe that it was the Princess who was delivered of a child——"

"No—I do not believe it," returned Loftus; "and you shall see that step by step I will unravel the whole skein of this dark and mysterious proceeding, tangled though it be. Hold your peace—follow my counsel—do as I require—and you shall be well rewarded: but act otherwise—seek to

betray me—or disobey my directions, and you shall be exposed fully and punished mercilessly!"

"Depend upon it, Mr. Loftus," said Maravelli, "I will serve you in all things:"—and it was now with fear and trembling that he gazed upon our young hero, who seemed like an avenging angel pursuing the thread of heaven's own inscrutable designs.

"You have told me," he resumed, fixing his eyes upon Maravelli with a look that showed he was determined to be obeyed in whatever he demanded, —"you have told me that you frequently devote your leisure hours to anatomical pursuits, and that Kobolt and his companions supply you with what the faculty denominate *subjects?* In that case, you must have a dissecting-room; and it is there that I propose to leave this infant corpse for the present. Now conduct me to your dissecting-room, doctor."

Maravelli took up the lamp—while Loftus, having secured the tell-tale cambric handkerchief and flannel about his person, enveloped the tiny corpse in the canvass, and with his loathsome burthen followed the doctor, who led him through the hall to a room opening from a dark passage at the end. This place was fitted up with all the grim, hideous machinery and apparatus of a dissecting-room. There was the pulley fixed to the ceiling, with the cord and the hook attached thereto, so as to elevate at will a corpse when stretched upon the slightly inclining plane of the leaden table over which the cordage hung. There were scalpels, dissecting-knives, saws, trepanning instruments, and various anatomical implements,—pails also, to catch the fluids and the entrails of the subjects—and mops to cleanse the floor. In a word, the studio was complete for its ghastly purpose; and although there was no corpse at the moment when Maravelli led Jocelyn in, yet was there a faint sickly odour against which the heart heaved. It seemed as if the clammy nauseating smell of the dead had settled itself in that place—clinging to the very ceiling and walls like a grave-mist, fetid and inexpulsable!

Against the wall stood two upright boxes—tall, narrow, and painted black. One of the doors had by some accident come open—revealing a bleached skeleton as the ghastly tenant of that wooden home!

"These are the bones of a murderer, who was guillotined about seven years ago in the market-place," said the physician, pointing to the object just named. "The other box contains the skeleton of his wife, who suffered death with him and for the same cause. I obtained possession of their corpses after their execution, and have preserved their bones thus. Where the vertebræ of the neck were severed by the axe of the guillotine, I have fastened the bones with wire."

But Loftus did not pay any particular attention to these anatomies, which were in reality the objects of the physician's special admiration; and having deposited the corpse of the child upon the leaden table, he turned away from the dissecting-room.

"I shall not insult you by demanding the key of that place," he said to Maravelli, as they again stood together in the hall: "but I charge you not to let those remains disappear from the table where I have left them."

"I shall not deceive you in any way, Mr. Loftus," responded Maravelli, as he locked the door of the dissecting-room and put the key in his pocket.

He and Jocelyn then separated, each to retire to his respective chamber; and when our hero was alone, he could not help felicitating himself upon having been enabled, by a favourable concatenation of circumstances, to do so much in comparatively so short a period of time towards the unravelment of the conspiracy against the persecuted wife of the Prince Regent.

CHAPTER CLIV.

THE THREE SISTERS.

The day that dawned upon the night of Jocelyn's adventures, as just recorded, was ushered in by one of those brilliant mornings which render the climate so wholesome, the heavens so cloudless, and the whole face of nature so transcendingly beautiful for the dweller upon the banks of Lake Leman. It was, as the reader is aware, the early part of May at the period of which we are writing, and many of those fruits which in England are not ripened until six weeks later were now gemming the borders, or hanging in rich clusters to the trees. Thus strawberries, cherries, gooseberries, currants, and all the earlier fruits were mingling their luscious hues with the emerald foliage; and the gardens belonging to the suburban villas of Geneva appeared in all the pride of their beauty.

It was about half-past seven o'clock on this lovely morning, that three beautiful creatures were gathered in a balcony at the open casement of a bed-chamber overlooking the garden of the Princess's villa. These were Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen.

Agatha, the eldest, appeared the least thing pale and delicate. Indeed, but three weeks had elapsed since she became a mother under the circumstances already described; and with an amazing fortitude and a surprising amount of physical energy, had she performed all her duties as heretofore,—ever in attendance upon the Princess, always one of the first down at the breakfast-table, and scrupulously regular in observing the routine of the household. Thus was it utterly impossible to suspect that she had so recently passed through that ordeal which is so terrible even for the woman who is surrounded by all comforts fitted for the occasion, and who, by having no shame to conceal, may retain her couch until nature restores herself again. But it was not without a painful effort that Agatha had thus defied as it were the ordinary course of nature; and there had been moments when though the smile was upon her lip, agony was in all her limbs, and though her spirits seemed elevated as if inspired by thrilling music, her frame was in reality drooping as if she must sink down through mere exhaustion. Indeed, had it not been for certain excellent restoratives and sovereign cordials which Mrs. Ranger had administered, Agatha never could have sustained her part in such a manner: but even though she succeeded in doing so, it was at some little sacrifice of her health—and the wonder with her sisters and Mrs. Ranger was, *not* that she looked somewhat

pale and delicate, but that she was so little pale and delicate as she appeared!

And now behold her, in a loose morning wrapper—one of those elegant French muslin *negligées* which so well become a lovely woman and give such an air of sweet and touching interest to the invalid,—one of those *negligées*, in a word, which tantalise the eye with glimpses of the charms that they envelop and which reveal all the contours that they ought to conceal. But it was through no coquetry at the present moment that Agatha Owen had assumed this winning garb: it was merely thrown hastily on ere her toilette was completed, in order that she might enjoy with her sisters the fresh air of the morning in that balcony, and woo to her pale face the breeze which blowing softly and gently over the warm plains, lost the chill at first imparted by the snow-capped mountains. For such a breeze was well calculated to bring the blush of the rose back to Agatha's countenance; and as she inhaled that pure air, it seemed as if her lungs expanded with the renovation of vigorous health.

One arm, the roundness of which was defined by an elegant bracelet, lay negligently over the plump white shoulders of her sister Emma, whose morning toilette was completed: while on the other side of Agatha appeared Julia, equally lovely, equally dissolute, but more sentimental and affectionate than her sisters.

Agatha's dark brown hair was arranged in glossy bands, ornamented with a white rose—an emblem of that chastity which she possessed not! Emma's hair was in tresses, but gathered in a knot behind, and fastened with a circlet of pearls—being thus drawn up from a neck that was dazzling in its whiteness and admirable in its arching shapeliness. Julia's hair showered in a myriad ringlets over her white sloping shoulders, and down upon her fine bosom, which the morning dress left much exposed

according to the fashion of the time. She also wore a white rose at the side of her head; and of her it might be observed as of her elder sister, that it was an emblem of the purity which had passed away from her!

Very beautiful appeared the three sisters, as they thus inhaled the fresh breeze of morning in that balcony worked over with embroidery of real flowers: and, alas! sorrowful indeed is the reflection that the external aspect of those lovely creatures was very far from serving as an index of their minds within. Fair and stainless were the caskets as they seemed to the eye: but no gems of matchless price were enclosed in those angelic incarnations. No—in proportion as the exterior embellishments were beautiful and captivating, so were the internal thoughts corrupt and impure. Ah! of what avail is the snowy bosom if the heart that beats within is a volcano of furious passions?

But to continue the thread of our narrative. Between seven and eight on this delightful morning was it, that Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen were together in the balcony of the eldest sister's chamber.

"Who could ever wish to return to cold and cheerless England from such a clime as this?" said Julia, as she slowly carried her fine hazel eyes over the garden belonging to the villa—the fields beyond—and the mountains which rose in the distance.

"Would you really like to settle down at Geneva with some good-tempered, confiding husband—a native of the country?" asked Emma, raising her own dark eyes towards her younger sister.

"No—I do not think I should like to marry a foreigner," replied Julia.

"Well then," resumed Emma, "what should you say to settling down here, in a villa of your own, as an independent lady—but of course with a lover on the sly to be a consolation and a companion in hours that would otherwise be monotonous indeed?"

"I am sure," said Agatha, the eldest sister, "that you can neither be such silly girls as to think of settling here in a foreign country. In the first place to marry on the Continent is really no joke: for if the husband should happen to catch you going a little astray, he can have you locked up in prison for a couple of years or so. Then, as to the other alternative, of always solacing oneself with lovers, let me assure you that nothing would be more dreadful than to be exposed to the jealousy of these foreign admirers. It frequently happens that they murder their mistresses through excessive love, and then make away with themselves."

"Ah! this a little exaggeration and romancing on your part, Agatha," observed Emma, laughing. "However, I can safely promise you that I have no thought of settling myself here: and I can answer for Julia, that she is not so foolish either."

"So far," resumed Agatha, "from our even dreaming of such a thing, I sincerely hope that we shall soon be enabled to give up our present mission and receive its reward."

"Hush! do not speak too loud," said Emma: "we may be overheard from the neighbouring windows. But speaking of a reward, what recompense will be conferred on us, think you? The Prince Regent could scarcely create us Peeresses in our own right, with handsome pensions. The scandal would be too great," she continued, in a low and cautious tone, "after we shall have been called upon to give evidence against the Princess——"

"Hush! hush! 'tis for you now to be cautious, you silly girl," said Julia, placing her hand playfully upon her sister's mouth.

"What should you say then," asked Agatha, bending down and speaking in a whisper, "if the Prince were to find each of us an old wealthy Peer just so far advanced in his dotage as to be amorously inclined, without being over nice as to the reputation his bride may have borne before her marriage?"

"Something of this sort must the Prince do for us," said Emma.

"Mamma hinted as much in the last letter she wrote to Mrs. Ranger," said Agatha. "But come—you must assist me to finish my toilette. The hour advances for us to descend to the breakfast-table."

Thus speaking, the eldest sister stepped back from the balcony into her chamber; and putting off the elegant French wrapper, she proceeded to array herself in the garb prescribed by the fashion of the time as the morning-toilette for ladies in attendance upon Royalty. This costume partook more of that which constitutes the evening-dress of the present day: for the *corsage* was cut low, the sleeves were short, and a profusion of jewellery was worn.

"I wonder," said Emma, as she assisted Agatha to put on her dress, "whether the change of affairs in France will turn to the advantage of our former friend Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, as he chose to call himself:"—and she laughed gaily at the reminiscences which the mention of his name conjured up.

"Doubtless he is still a prisoner at Grenoble," said Agatha. "At all events he was still a captive there at the time the last accounts were received in England from the French authorities, respecting him."

"Ah!" observed Julia: "but that was before the sudden and unexpected return of Napoleon into France. We know not what may have happened since——"

"Depend upon it," interrupted Agatha, "if Jocelyn——I suppose we shall never call him by any other name than Jocelyn," she added, laughing. "But I was going to observe that if he were free, you may rely upon it we should have heard or seen something of him at Geneva ere this. Come, Julia, confess—would you not like to have to play Laura Linden all over again?"

"If you could ensure me a successful result," rejoined the youngest of the three charming demireps: "but *that* was something more than you could even achieve for yourselves," she added, with a merry laugh that rang musically through the chamber.

"Never did a young man withstand such temptations before," said Emma. "May we not without vanity declare that it was the three Graces tempting Apollo?"

"Three goddesses tempting a youth of god-like beauty," observed Agatha. "You know that at Richmond we were called the Four Goddesses——"

"Including poor Mary," said Julia, with a sigh. "I wish she was with us, instead of being buried at that cottage in Canterbury, where she still was when mamma last wrote——"

"Oh! never mind Mary," interrupted Agatha, somewhat petulantly. "She is something more

than sentimental—she is a maudlin, sickening spooney with her rigid ideas of virtue. But we have been talking of Jocelyn Loftus—how is it that not once, during the present conversation, the names of Curzon and Malpas have been mentioned?" she asked, her beautiful countenance softening into an arch smile.

"What!" ejaculated Emma, "after the scandalous trick they endeavoured to play us—plotting to carry us off to Lausanne by means of such dreadful villains as that Kobolt and his gang, whom, as we have since heard, rumour declares to be nothing less than resurrection-men——Ah! if I were old Mrs. Ranger, I should never fancy myself again, after having been in contact with those ruffians! I should always suspect my very clothes smelt of dead bodies. And old Mrs. Hubbard too——"

"I really cannot help laughing," said Agatha, "when I think of those two antiquated heroines of the abduction scene!"

"How astounded Malpas must have been!" said Emma. "Served him right too! I am very glad of it."

"Poor Curzon," murmured the sentimental Julia: "I really think the punishment was *too* severe, seeing that he meant to carry me off through love."

"I dare say if you were to meet him again, Julia," said Agatha, "you would forgive him."

"*She* might!" exclaimed Emma: "but I declare I would never forgive Malpas."

"Nor would I forgive Curzon," retorted Julia, raising her head proudly. "You both seem to think I am weak-minded and foolish: I tell you that I am as strong in purpose as either of you; and therefore, once for all, let me beg that I may be believed when I declare that whenever I meet Curzon again I will tell him frankly and candidly that everything is at an end between us. As for you, Emma," she continued, flinging a somewhat angry but also arch look upon her sister, "it is very easy of *you* to talk so slightingly of Malpas since you have already formed a new attachment. Ah! don't think that I am blind to the amorous looks which you have lately flung upon the good-looking squerry——"

"What! Baron Bergami?" ejaculated Agatha: then, evidently struck by something, she immediately added, "And now that I recollect, you have so managed, Emma, for some days past that he shall sit next to you at breakfast and give you his arm from the drawing-room to the dining-room. Yes, and also last evening and the evening before, when we all walked out along the shore——Ah! Emma, how the blood is rising to your cheek!" exclaimed Agatha, laughing, as she held her snowy hand against her sister's face which had indeed become of the richest carnation. "How it burns!"

"Come, I will make a confession," said Emma, now endeavouring to escape from her confusion in a merry laugh; "and I know not why I should have attempted to conceal this new feeling even for a single day, inasmuch as we do not usually have any secrets from each other. The truth is, I have been *playing* Baron Bergami so long and to such effect, that I have fallen in love with him myself. Now, my dear girls, you must observe that when I am dressed up for that particular purpose, with my hair all gathered so as to appear to flow just down as far as the nape of the neck, like Bergami's—with that elegant frock-coat too, imprisoning me in the admirable symmetry of its shapely cut—then, with those trousers with their great plaits at the hips and round the front, gradually diminishing until they terminate in a graceful arch over the boots—yes, and then those loves of boots themselves, so exquisitely shaped, with such high heels, making me at least two inches taller than I am, and giving such a hollow to the shape of my foot that as I stand you might roll a half-crown upright underneath,—when I see myself thus attired, the snowy shirt-frill arranged in such a manner as to conceal the swell of my bosom—and last, though not least, those false whiskers and that elegant moustache,—when I contemplate myself, I say, thus attired, in the full length mirror, I really fancy that I *am* Bergami—and—and——don't you think that the Baron is very, very handsome?"

The manner in which Emma asked this question, suddenly gave such a droll turn to the graphic and picturesque portraiture she had been drawing of herself, that Agatha and Julia could not help bursting out laughing. Emma also laughed; and a delightful spectacle was it, the mirth of those three lovely girls—a mirth that displayed teeth white as ivory between lips of wet coral—teeth which were pure and perfect as pearls themselves could be, and lips which seemed so fresh in their dewy moisture that it were hard indeed to believe that the hot kisses of burning lust had ever been pressed upon them. But, Oh! who that observes the rose when drooping at eve with the diamond dew-drops sparkling upon every modestly closing leaf, would imagine that this flower seemingly so pure, so chaste, so delicate, had been boldly basking in the gorgeous sunlight during the whole day, and had drunk in the impassioned glow without parching or scorching?

"Then are we to understand," said Agatha, when her own and her sisters' mirth had somewhat subsided, "that you love Bergami?"

"Yes—love him as I loved Jocelyn," answered Emma,—"because he was handsome and I desired him: or love him as I have loved Malpas, because I cannot exist without a lover."

"Oh! we can understand why you love him," exclaimed Agatha, still laughing. "But remember, Emma," she added more seriously, "these amours may have their consequences, as mine did—and it may not always be so easy to get over them——"

"Well, my dear sister," interrupted Emma, "it will be time enough to talk of *that* when the danger presents itself. Besides, you must not get on too fast in your conjectures. I am very far from having ensnared Bergami as yet—he even appears rather distant——not exactly distant, for he is politeness itself, as you well know: but he will not see that I love him. If my hand lingers in his, he does not press it: if my looks fix themselves upon him, his are cast down: if my foot happens to rest against his under the table, he begs my pardon as if he himself had accidentally kicked me."

"Why, this is as bad as Loftus in the post-chaise," exclaimed Agatha, "when we first travelled with him, and before we knew who he really was. And yet the Baron does not look as if he would prove another Jocelyn: nor do I believe that there can be more than one man of Jocelyn's stoic disposition in the world—and that man is Jocelyn himself."

"Well, at all events, I intend to subdue Bergami if it be possible," observed Emma. "By the bye," she added, suddenly turning the conversation to another topic as a thought struck her, "did not her Royal Highness say something yesterday about getting up private theatricals for our own amusement here at the villa?"

"Yes," answered Julia: "but in consequence of some observation that was made by one of the ladies, I fancy her Royal Highness will renounce the idea."

"Ah! I recollect," said Emma. "The Princess was reminded that her husband, the Prince Regent, had given a series of private theatricals at Carlton House; and she does not wish to imitate at Geneva what he does in London."

"I noticed that her Royal Highness," continued Julia, "was looking, last evening, when we returned from our walk, over the file of English newspapers; and I saw that she was scanning with great attention a description which the *Times* gave of the very first private representation, in December last, at Carlton House. I watched her Royal Highness as she read over the names of all the *élite* of the aristocracy who were present. Of course there was the brilliant and incomparable Lady Sackville—the Countess of Curzon—the Marchioness of Conyngham—Miss Bathurst—Miss Arbuthnot—Lady Prescott——"

"Oh never mind enumerating the names," interrupted Emma: "we have scanned them over and over again a dozen times. Depend upon it that her Royal Highness regards as a personal enemy, and also as a positive rival, every young and good-looking woman who visits at Carlton House."

"No doubt she does—and naturally so under the circumstances," observed Agatha. "But what has all this got to do with the topic on which we were conversing—the private theatricals?"

"Oh! only this," returned Julia, "that I was about to add, when Emma interrupted me, that so soon as her Royal Highness read over that list of names, she said '*Oh! I perceive that one must have the most dazzling beauties that can be congregated to make private theatricals go off well; and therefore we will not attempt anything of the sort here.*' This she said with considerable bitterness," observed Julia.

At this moment a time-piece on the mantel in Agatha's room chimed half-past eight; and the three young ladies, suddenly cutting short their colloquy, hastened down to the breakfast-parlour.

CHAPTER CLV.

THE AUDIENCE AND THE LETTER.

It was a little past noon on the same day, and her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was walking in the garden attended by Agatha, Emma, and Julia, as ladies-in-waiting—the other three ladies of her suite not being on duty for this day. The Baron Bergami was likewise present as equerry-in-waiting.

Her Royal Highness was at this time forty-five years of age. She was stout: her *embonpoint* had expanded into luxuriance, slightly perhaps approaching to coarseness. Her cheeks had a somewhat heightened colour upon them which was not exactly that of health, but seemed to indicate a love of good living. Nevertheless she was temperate and abstemious; and that inclination to ruddiness was entirely natural. Her neck being totally deficient in that graceful arching which gives a statuesque and dignified air to a well-dressed woman, had the same awkwardness of appearance as if it were short. Her eyes were handsome and of a fine blue, indicating good temper and generosity of heart. It was perhaps this expression, added to a placid, unaffected smile, which from her girlhood had seemed stereotyped upon her lips, which to some degree prevented the observer from noticing the shade of mournfulness which nevertheless had for years past been growing upon her countenance; and as her disposition was naturally lively and vivacious, she did not outwardly display as much feeling as she inwardly experienced relative to the misfortunes that had overtaken her, and the bitter hatred of which her husband made her the victim. In a word, that she was an amiable, well-meaning, kind-hearted woman, there can be no doubt: that she was thoughtless, and that her manners were characterised with all the freedom peculiar to Continental ladies, cannot be denied: but that she was criminal and faithless to her husband, is not to be believed for a single moment.

And now a few words relative to Bergami. He was at the time of which we are writing, about thirty-eight years of age, and remarkably handsome. His dark hair, glossy whiskers, and delicately pencilled moustache, set off a countenance that was pale and pensive. His dark eyes were generally cast downward as if in thought: but his fine form, slender even to youthful symmetry, was upright as a dart. He dressed habitually in deep black; though on formal occasions, when in attendance upon the Princess, he wore a sort of uniform surtout coat of blue cloth, frogged, braided, and buttoned close up to the chin. In either costume he looked the perfect gentleman: but in the latter he had a military appearance, truly becoming.

In manners he was gentle, unassuming, but agreeably courteous. His conversation, unobtrusive and quiet, was interesting, instructive, and often fascinating; while he himself appeared entirely unconscious of its powers. Towards the Princess his demeanour was ever characterised by the most marked respect; and though from his very boyhood he had known her, yet did he never appear to lose sight of the great distance which social conventionalisms had placed between him and her. Indeed, so delicate—so considerate—and so nobly generous was his behaviour towards her Royal Highness, that he never under any circumstances would allow himself to be left alone with her even for an instant: and if, when in the drawing-room, he beheld a chance of all the ladies-in-waiting being absent from the apartment at one and the same moment, he invariably made it a point of retiring ere left in *tête-à-tête* with the Princess.

Having recorded these few observations relative to characters whom history has made memorable, we now resume the thread of our narrative.

"I am sure I do not know how long we are likely to remain here," said the Princess, pursu-

ing the thread of a conversation already commenced in the drawing-room ere she came out to walk in the garden. "So much now depends upon the course which events may take in France. You see, it is quite evident from the newspaper reports that there will be a desperate struggle between Bonaparte and the Allies——is it not so, Baron?"

"No doubt of it, madam," responded Bergami, to whom the query was addressed. "Immense preparations are being made; and it is probable that your Royal Highness's august father, the Duke of Brunswick, will be invested with a very important command in the armies mustered for the coming conflict."

"And if Napoleon be beaten?" said the Princess inquiringly.

"Then peace, your Royal Highness, will instantaneously be given to Europe—I may add to the whole world," answered Bergami.

"But if, on the other hand, Napoleon should conquer?" asked the Princess.

"Then, madam," rejoined the equerry, "it will be impossible to foresee the consequences. But this much may be predicted, that all Continental Europe is sure to be subjected to the Emperor's sway."

"And as the wife of the Prince Regent," continued her Royal Highness, "I should incur the risk of being seized upon by the French, even here at Geneva, and thrown into some fortress. Well then, as I was telling you, young ladies, just now," she continued, addressing herself to Agatha and Julia, while Emma remained behind, walking by the side of Bergami, "our sojourn in this beautiful spot depends entirely on the course that occurrences may take."

At this moment a page was seen advancing from the villa; and approaching the Princess, he said with a low obeisance, "May it please your Royal Highness, an English lady craves an audience."

"Give me the lady's card, that I may hand it to her Royal Highness," at once said Agatha, who, as well as her sisters, was ever on the alert to prevent any one from obtaining access to the Princess unless it suited their purpose.

"The lady neither gave name nor card," said the page; "but requested that this note might be handed to her Royal Highness, should there be any hesitation manifested in receiving her."

According to the etiquette invariably observed in respect to royal personages, Agatha, as the senior lady-in-waiting, received the note which the page now presented: and opening it, she ran her eyes quickly over its contents.

"Oh! it is no one of any consequence—a mere pretence and excuse," she said. "Your Royal Highness will do well to decide upon not granting this interview."

"But what does the note say?" asked the Princess. "Who is the lady? what does she pretend to be?"

"Evidently an impostress," rejoined Agatha. "Your Royal Highness's exceeding benevolence and charity give encouragement to all kinds of persons to approach as suppliants for your bounty. Shall I order the page to state that your Royal Higness cannot be disturbed at present?"

The Princess, good-natured and confiding as she was, and never liking to thwart the ladies by whom she was surrounded, was about to give her assent to the course which Agatha suggested,—when the sudden fancy took her that she would look at that note which had just been presented. Perhaps it was a mere whim on the Princess's part thus to peruse that note: or perhaps it was that Miss Owen had on this occasion slightly over-acted her part and had seemed *too* anxious to prevent the audience solicited, —so that a faint suspicion, but vague and indefinite, was excited in the Princess's mind. Whichever were the cause, certain it is that the Princess suddenly assumed an air of decision and firmness which she seldom wore on ordinary occasions; and turning to Agatha, she said, "Give me that note."

Miss Owen dared not disobey—nor was she even imprudent enough to show any reluctance; but at once placed the billet in her Royal Highness's hand. The Princess thereupon glanced over its contents, which ran as follow:—

"May it please your Royal Highness,—The writer of this is a lady who has had the honour of enjoying the acquaintance of your Royal Highness's august daughter the Princess Charlotte; and she has likewise been honoured by the notice of her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia. She is the bearer of a letter of the utmost importance from the latter Princess to your Royal Highness, and therefore most respectfully and humbly solicits an interview, that she may have an opportunity of presenting the same to your Royal Highness, she being pledged to deliver that letter *into your Royal Highness's own hand.* If your Royal Highness's suppliant refrains from appending her name to this letter, it is for a reason which will be satisfactorily explained should the honour of an audience be granted."

"I really do not see, Miss Owen," said the Princess, with a voice and look of gentle though grave remonstrance, "that you were justified in coming to so rapid and uncharitable a conclusion relative to the writer of this note. There is nothing on the face of it which should have led you to suppose that she wished to obtain access to me for mendicant purposes."

"Your Royal Highness must surely be aware," answered Agatha, with the coollest effrontery, "that the writers of begging letters adopt all kinds of subterfuges and devices——"

"But I do not think this is a case in point," interrupted the Princess, still in a tone of rebuke. "At all events——"

"Heaven forbid that I should venture to interpose my humble opinion, well meant though it be, in a manner disagreeable to your Royal Highness!"—and as Agatha thus spoke with an assumed tone of deep humiliation, she affected also to be hurt by her royal mistress's manner towards her, and the crocodile tears trickled down her cheeks.

"My dear girl," exclaimed the generous-hearted Princess, touched by Agatha's apparent grief, "not for a moment did I intend to wound your feelings! I have no doubt that you acted for the best."

"As I always do, in my love and devotion towards your Royal Highness," said Agatha, now pretending to cheer up. "But if you have resolved, madam, to see this lady, permit me at all events to go and satisfy myself that she is a person who may with propriety be introduced into your royal presence."

"Whoever she may be, I will see her," said the Princess, again speaking in a tone of decision. Then addressing the page, she said, "Go and bring that lady hither. I will see her here."

Agatha, Emma, and Julia exchanged quick glances with each other, to imply their fear that something was wrong: but these looks were so swiftly interchanged, that they were not noticed by either the Princess or Bergami.

Her Royal Highness now placed herself on one of the elegant garden-seats, made of iron and painted green, which were ranged at intervals along the walks. Agatha stood on her right hand: Emma, Julia, and Bergami took their stations behind their royal mistress. Nothing was now said during the couple of minutes which elapsed ere the page reappeared, escorting the visitress thither. But during that brief interval her Royal Highness once more perused the note which she still held in her hand; while Agatha hastily collected all her ideas and summoned all her presence of mind to her aid—for she felt convinced that some scene requiring no ordinary artifice, ingenuity, and duplicity was now at hand.

The moment the page was again seen advancing, all eyes were fixed upon the lady who accompanied him; and Agatha as well as her sisters at once perceived that every chance of being enabled to throw upon her the slur of a begging-letter impostress was gone. For she was not only handsomely dressed in half mourning; but her whole appearance indicated the well-bred, elegant lady in good circumstances. On approaching the Princess, she raised her veil and revealed a handsome countenance whose beauty was enhanced at the moment by the glow which the excitement she now experienced conjured up to her cheeks. The Princess instantaneously fancied that those features were not altogether unknown to her; but beyond this she had no defined and positive recollection of the lady. As for Agatha and her sisters, they were totally unacquainted with her: but the quick glances they flung upon her as she accosted their royal mistress, seemed intended to pierce her through and through.

The page, having conducted the visitress into the presence of the Princess Caroline, withdrew to a distance, beyond earshot, so as to be ready to show her out again from the garden when the interview should be ended. The lady made a courtly obeisance as she approached the Princess, and then stood waiting to be spoken to before she herself ventured to breathe a word. Indeed, her whole manner, conduct, and bearing at once proved that she was accustomed to the etiquette of royal circles.

"I have read your note, madam, with the greatest attention and interest," began the Princess, with a voice and mien alike affable and encouraging. "You say that you have a letter?"

"In the first place, may it please your Royal Highness," said Agatha, advancing a step or two, "this lady will be kind enough to go through the usual formality and give me her card, that I may present it to your Royal Highness."

"Most cheerfully will I do so at once," answered the lady in a mild but firm voice, "provided that the mention of my name may not in any way prejudice the object of my mission:"—and here her large dark eyes were swept rapidly over the three ladies-in-waiting, whom she no doubt at once perceived to be sisters, and thence perhaps guessed who they were.

"Your card, madam?" said Agatha, somewhat imperiously. "No stranger is allowed to exchange words with her Royal Highness until the name has been duly announced and the presence of the individual approved of."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the lady, "to read the letter of which I am the bearer?"—and she raised her hand to the bosom of her dress to draw forth the despatch she alluded to.

"Madam, your card?" repeated Agatha, now speaking more imperiously than before, and extending her hand to receive the card which she thus demanded in a way that showed she would take no refusal.

"Yes," said the Princess, herself beginning to think there was something suspicious in the lady refusing to give her name: "you must announce who you are; and I promise that whatever name it may be, the avowal shall not in any way prejudice you—though I am at a loss to conceive how you should entertain such an idea, provided it be a name which you can make known without a blush."

But as the Princess thus spoke, a blush *did* arise, and quickly too, upon the cheeks of the lady; which Agatha, instantly perceiving, failed not to take advantage of.

"This lady evidently dares not reveal her name," she said. "It will be much better for her to withdraw at once:"—and this hint, intended indeed as a *command*, was accompanied by an imperious gesture of the hand.

Now, in real truth, Agatha as senior lady-in-waiting, was only performing her duty by insisting on the name being given or on the lady's prompt withdrawal. The lady herself seemed to know this full well; and as the Princess remained silent, allowing the affair to take its proper course, she said, "I crave pardon for this hesitation and delay on my part. Here is my card."

"*Lady Prescott*," said Agatha as she glanced at the card which was now handed to her: then, as a sudden reminiscence struck her, she turned towards the Princess and whispered, "This lady is *not* a fit character to be here. Your Royal Highness will doubtless remember that amongst the list of those who were present at the private theatricals at Carlton House last December——"

"Ah! to be sure—I remember!" said her Royal Highness: "the name of Lady Prescott was amongst them. But is not this also the name of one of the ladies belonging to the Queen's household?"

"It is so, madam," replied Agatha: then in a still lower and more impressive tone, she added, "This lady comes from the camp of your Royal Highness's enemies."

At this moment Emma bent down her head over the Princess's shoulder, and said in a whisper, "Lady Prescott is no longer in the Queen's household. I remember reading in the newspaper of her resignation some months ago, and of her being succeeded by Miss Arbuthnot."

"I think also," superadded Agatha, who had just been taking another brief but piercing survey of Lady Prescott,—"I think that if her ladyship be not privately married, she at least ought to be."

"Yes," observed the Princess, now fixing her eyes also with steadfastness upon Lady Prescott: "beyond all doubt she ought to be married. But, Oh! the English Court—and those private theatri-

cals at Carlton House:"—and here her Royal Highness shook her head ominously.

This hurried and whispered colloquy occupied but little more than a minute, during which Lady Prescott remained standing at a distance of about four yards from the garden-seat where the Princess was placed: and though she caught not a syllable of what was uttered, she nevertheless was at no loss to understand that the observations thus covertly passing, concerned herself. Not however that she for a moment suspected her actual condition was descried: she had flattered herself that her pregnancy was imperceptible with the dress which she wore and the appliances of art she had put in requisition to conceal her shame. But the keen eyes of Agatha, who had passed through all that process of concealment and artifice, had not failed to detect the secret,—while Lady Prescott herself fancied that the whispered discourse which was going on merely regarded the little bit of scandal that had been coupled with her name in London at the time of her resignation of her situation at Court. But still, even this idea which had previously made her blush ere she revealed her name, now made her blush again as she observed those rapid whisperings which were passing amongst the group, and the piercing glances that were flung towards herself.

"May it please your Royal Highness," she said, recovering her presence of mind, "I did not at once reveal my name for fear some prejudice might exist against it. But my mission will be accomplished if you permit me to hand this letter, which is addressed to yourself from your Royal Highness's august sister-in-law and cousin the Princess Sophia."

"I think you would do well, Lady Prescott," interrupted Agatha, "to withdraw. Her Royal Highness even wonders at your audacity in appearing before her in a condition, which, had you any feeling of decency, you would have been only too anxious to conceal."

A deadly pallor overspread the countenance of the unhappy Lady Prescott as the eldest Miss Owen thus addressed her in words proving that her secret had indeed been penetrated. But with a desperate resolve to accomplish her mission, she drew forth a letter from her bosom—advanced towards the Princess—and said, "Take it, madam—I implore you to take it! Whatever I may be, my shame—my misfortune—cannot alter nor prejudice the contents of this note; and you may judge of its importance by the risk of exposure which I have run in undertaking to be the bearer of it."

"No—her Royal Highness cannot receive anything from your hand," said Agatha, sternly. "Withdraw, madam—withdraw! Every moment that you remain here is an additional insult to her Royal Highness."

"Take care, Miss Owen," retorted the now enraged—almost maddened Lady Prescott, "that the time does not come when *your* presence shall also be regarded as an insult!"

"This is a sheer impertinence," exclaimed Agatha, with the quickness of an hysterical excitement—and from head to foot she trembled with a mortal terror, as if a thunderbolt had fallen at her feet.

"Give me that letter and begone!" exclaimed the Princess, sternly addressing herself to Lady Prescott, whose conduct she naturally regarded as a deliberate and wanton insolence towards Miss Owen.

Lady Prescott accordingly handed the letter to the Princess and then hurried away, overwhelmed with confusion, and consoled only by the reflection that after having dared so much—and likewise endured so much—she had succeeded in placing Jocelyn's despatch in the hands of her Royal Highness. The page, who was waiting at a distance, hastened to conduct her out of the garden: but ere she quitted the grounds she threw a hasty look back, and beheld the Princess with the letter open in her hands.

"She is reading it—she is reading it!" said Lady Prescott to herself: and in the joy now experienced on account of the success of her mission, she forgot for the moment the indignity, the humiliation, and the exposure through which she had just passed.

But let us return to the royal group. The moment the Princess Caroline had taken the letter in the manner already described from Lady Prescott, she tore it open; and the envelope she in her haste let fall upon the ground. Agatha stooped—picked it up—and appeared to fold it in an unpremeditated, unwitting manner, while the Princess opened the letter which the envelope had contained.

It was the missive from the Princess Sophia, and ran as follows:—

"*St. James's Palace, London.*
"*December*, 1814.

"MY DEAREST CAROLINE,

"I beg and entreat of you to see the bearer of this, who will explain to you what his object is in approaching you—what he has already suffered in the endeavour to seek you—and how it is that he is compelled to adopt extraordinary means to obtain access to your presence. He bears the name of Jocelyn Loftus: but that is not his real one. *This* he will reveal to you, together with the reasons which have induced him to adopt the assumed one. On no account be dissuaded from seeing him. That attempts *will* be made so to dissuade you I am well aware beforehand: but I entreat you, for your own sake—for the sake of your dear daughter Charlotte, who knows of the step which is being taken—I entreat you, I say, not to listen to *any representations that may be made in order to prevent him from obtaining access to you!* Rest assured it is of the highest importance! At all events see him—hear him—and then judge for yourself.

"Ever your affectionate sister-in-law and cousin,
"SOPHIA."

Over the shoulders of her Royal Highness did the sharp eyes of Emma and Julia peruse this letter, while they had all the appearance of standing in respectful attention behind her; so that not even Bergami himself noticed that they were thus scanning their royal mistress's correspondence. As for Agatha, who was standing by the Princess, she had been engaged in folding up the envelope in an apparently listless manner, but in reality with the utmost care to preserve it.

"Here is a singular letter!" exclaimed the Princess. "You may read it, my dear girl," she added, handing it to Agatha: "and I must thank you, by the bye, for the manner in which you ere now vindicated not only the respect due to me, but also the delicacy of our sex with regard to that Lady Prescott. But how could she have become the bearer of this letter, seeing that it speaks of a Mr. Loftus? Moreover, it is dated in December; and this is

May! My sister-in-law the Princess Sophia has chosen a somewhat laggard messenger; and the vital importance of the document must have worn itself out over and over again long ere this. But have I not heard the name of Jocelyn Loftus before?" she asked, with the air of one who seeks for a particular reminiscence.

"Assuredly, madam," was Agatha's prompt reply. "Does not your Royal Highness recollect our dear kind friend Mrs. Ranger informing you how grossly we were insulted by that young man whom we took to be a gentleman——or I even think he said he was a nobleman in disguise——did he not, Emma?"

"He did," was the young lady's response. "But you recollect what sad accounts we heard of him—and how he was arrested for travelling under a false name and being a very bad suspicious character indeed——"

"Yes," interjected Julia; "and you recollect, too, how I was compelled to remain behind you in Paris——through illness——and what dreadful things I learnt in addition to all you had previously heard——"

"Well, my dear girls," interrupted the Princess, "you can set your minds at rest by the reflection that Mr. Loftus does not appear to be forthcoming to seek an audience at my hands. How Lady Prescott could have become the bearer of a letter which it was evidently intended for *him* to deliver, is a mystery beyond all conjecture."

"Who knows," said Agatha, "but that this Lady Prescott is the mistress of the adventurer Loftus? Your Royal Highness may rest assured that he has imposed by some means upon the Princess Sophia—worked upon her credulity—and by his specious tales, as plausible as they are false, induced her to give him that letter of introduction to your Royal Highness?"

"There is a mystery about all this," remarked the Princess, a gradual uneasiness arising in her mind, and vague suspicions slowly developing their shadows around her like undefined phantoms dimly seen. "I know not what to think. From all I have heard, the impression made upon my mind relative to Mr. Loftus is certainly of no favourable nature. But then my sister-in-law's letter—so energetically, so emphatically worded—warns me against being dissuaded from seeing him. What does the Baron think of all this?"

Thus speaking, she abruptly turned towards Bergami, who, in his usual mood of intellectual pensiveness, had remained all along a silent witness of the whole scene which we have been describing. But he had lost nothing, neither deed nor word: for even when the young ladies were whisperingly directing the Princess's attention to Lady Prescott's condition, the Baron, placed where he was, could not help overhearing all that was said.

"What is your opinion, I ask," repeated the Princess, "upon all these matters?"

"Your Royal Highness is aware that whenever my sentiments are desired, I invariably give them frankly and candidly:"—such was Bergami's reply, delivered in a tone replete with the musical mildness of courtesy but with the accentuation of a manly decision.

"Then I desire you to speak with your usual frankness now," said the Princess both encouragingly and impatiently. "Come, Baron—what is your opinion?"

"I think, may it please your Royal Highness," said Bergami, "that if Lady Prescott had been suffered to enter into details, she would have explained any seeming contradictions or anomalies in all this proceeding. For instance, she might have stated how it is that the letter is dated in December and is only delivered in May—how she comes to be the bearer of it—where Mr. Loftus is—and all other particulars. I therefore think, may it please your Royal Highness, that considering this letter emanates from the Princess Sophia—that it addresses you so seriously—and that it adjures you so solemnly,—I think, I say, that it would have been prudent to have heard Lady Prescott at greater length, notwithstanding it was indiscreet in the beginning for a lady in her condition to have appeared before you. At all events, if Mr. Loftus be in Geneva, as I think is probable, it would be but prudent to see him."

"Then I have made up my mind how to act," exclaimed the Princess, who was entirely a creature of impulse: and starting abruptly from the garden-seat, she added, "Baron, I confide this matter entirely to you, with the request that you lose no time in sifting it to the very bottom. You, as a man, can see Mr. Loftus, whatever be his character: you can hear what he has to say, and judge accordingly. But if he be not at Geneva, then may you probably find out Lady Prescott's abode, and with some suitable apology for introducing yourself to her, ascertain what more she may have to say upon the business which brought her hither ere now. In conducting these inquiries let this letter itself serve as your credential."

With these words the Princess Caroline placed Sophia's despatch in the hands of Bergami, who forthwith took his departure to enter upon the investigation with which he was now charged. The Princess then re-entered the villa, followed by the three sisters, who exchanged looks of apprehension and alarm with each other.

"I can now dispense with your attendance until dinner-time," said her Royal Highness to the young ladies: "for I shall retire to my own room and pen a long epistle to the Princess Sophia, who at all events must have been animated by the kindest possible motives when she wrote that letter which was ere now delivered to me."

Agatha, Emma, and Julia—being thus released from attendance on their royal mistress for the next three or four hours—withdrew to one of their own chambers, to deliberate upon the scene which had ere now taken place in the garden. The moment they were alone together, Agatha produced the envelope which she had picked up and retained: for at the time her quick eye had caught some writing inside the paper as it fell to the ground.

The three sisters now read it in the following terms:—

"MADAM:—

"The undersigned, Jocelyn Loftus, the individual mentioned in the enclosed letter from the Princess Sophia, presents his duty to your Royal Highness, and begs to state that, having suffered an imprisonment of between four and five months at Grenoble—namely, from December until three days ago—he was unable to take any earlier steps towards placing the letter in your Royal Highness's hand.

"He does not now seek a personal interview in the first instance with your Royal Highness, because he is

well aware that *certain circumstances*, which he has to explain, would tend to defeat any such endeavour on his part to approach your Royal Highness.

"He however hopes that the lady who has kindly consented to become the bearer of this letter to your Royal Highness, will be enabled to return with a favourable answer to Jocelyn Loftus,—so that he may without delay present his homage to your Royal Highness.

"He is at present residing at the house of Dr. Maravelli, a physician and surgeon in the suburb of ——.

"In conclusion, he begs that *under no circumstances* will your Royal Highness permit yourself to be prejudiced against him, no matter from whose lips hostile or calumniating representations may come: for Jocelyn Loftus will be enabled to prove that his motives are utterly free from selfishness—his character unimpeachable—the persecutions he has endured most undeserved—and his aims and objects entirely in the interest of your Royal Highness.

"Geneva, May 12, 1815.'

Such were the lines written inside the envelope, and which the three sisters now hastily scanned with frightened looks, blanching cheeks, and palpitating hearts.

"What is to be done?" exclaimed Agatha, in consternation. "Loftus is at Maravelli's—— Ah! and now I understand," she half-shrieked forth, as a sudden reminiscence struck her.

"What do you understand?" asked Emma and Julia, both in a breath.

"That allusion which Lady Prescott made," returned Agatha. "Oh! I felt at the time it was something more that a mere random retort—that it was a deliberate taunt flung out full of malignant significancy!"

"But how is it possible she can suspect what has happened to *you?*" demanded Emma, who, as well as Julia, had caught the infection of Agatha's dismay.

"Oh! Maravelli must have penetrated the whole truth," exclaimed Agatha, wringing her hands in despair. "Instead of believing that it was the

Princess whom he delivered, he must have known that it was me! And he is not making a secret of it—he has told it to Loftus—Loftus has told it to this Lady Prescott—and now Bergami will go and find it all out! O God! exposure is imminent—ruin hangs over our heads!"

Clasping her white hands in despair, the unhappy young lady threw herself upon a sofa in the bedchamber, and gave way to an effusion of the wildest anguish. Julia became equally terrified; and though Emma could not but feel all the danger of her eldest sister's position, and also of her own and Julia's as accomplices in the concealment of the child-birth, she nevertheless showed more presence of mind than they on this trying occasion. She accordingly hurried to Mrs. Ranger's room, where she found that lady very busy in examining a new set of false teeth which had just been sent home by a famous dentist in Geneva. But the hag speedily forgot all about her artificial embellishments, when the affrighted Emma hastily sketched the outline of what had occurred within the last hour, and the fearful results which might ensue.

Accompanying Emma to the chamber where Agatha and Julia were sitting in despair upon the sofa, Mrs. Ranger urged them to collect all their fortitude and presence of mind, so that they might look the present danger boldly in the face if they meant to grapple with it at all.

The old woman and the three young ladies now sat in solemn conclave to deliberate upon the course that was to be pursued: but the more they weighed the perils of their position, the darker seemed the storm-clouds that were gathering around them.

"Now, girls," said Mrs. Ranger, suddenly adopting an air of such stern decision that this nervous, frivolous, affected old woman seemed in a moment to rise high above all her assumed weaknesses and trumpery vanities, when the gravity of the occasion demanded the development of her best energies: "now, girls, there is no use in mincing matters, and we must see exactly how we stand. Loftus is our evil genius: he is at Geneva—and the devil has thrown him in the way of Maravelli. They are together—and it is pretty certain that Maravelli has sold our secret to *him*. Depend upon it, he will ferret out every thing,—your accouchement, Agatha—the disposal of the child—and all! Then, even if he should be inclined to show mercy and spare us, that woman whom you have made your mortal enemy—this Lady Prescott, I mean—will expose us pitilessly. This is natural: it will be tit for tat—a woman's vengeance! Well then, what follows? *Concealment of birth* is a crime of magnitude in the Genevese Republic,—at least two years' imprisonment for the principal — that is *yourself*, Agatha — and eighteen months for your two sisters and me—besides utter ruin and eternal disgrace for us all! This is the position we are in; and those are the perils which now stare us in the face!"

"Good heavens!" murmured the three sisters, clasping their hands: "what is to be done? what is to be done?"

The reader beheld them in the morning—gay, bright, and beautiful—as they stood in the balcony, calling themselves Graces and Goddesses: and now he may behold them within the walls of that chamber—pale, trembling, convulsed indeed from head to foot with the crucifixion of anguish, and suffering mental agonies so acute that even to endure them for a few minutes would appear almost sufficient to turn those dark brown masses of hair silver white—dim all the lustre of those fine hazel eyes—and render those damask cheeks wrinkled, haggard, and ghastly!

"What is to be done? what is to be done?" they repeated, addressing their words in the most piteous accents to Mrs. Ranger: and it was as if three despairing beauties were adjuring some withered witch to work her spells on their behalf.

"What is to be done?" said Mrs. Ranger. "What is to be done?" she repeated slowly and deliberately: then suddenly fixing her eyes upon the three young ladies with a look which had a horrible fascination in it, she said in a deep tone but with accents that trembled not, "Murder must be done, if we would save ourselves!"

The three girls, who had been leaning forward—hanging as it were upon the slightest syllable to which the hag was to give utterance—started suddenly back as if she had changed all in a moment into a hideous reptile from which they recoiled loathingly: and though ejaculations of horror seemed to waver upon their lips, yet were they stifled ere sent forth.

"Yes—I mean what I say," continued Mrs. Ranger. "But I am not going to ask *you* to do the murderous deed. No—this Loftus and that Lady Prescott must be removed from our path: but it is Maravelli upon whose fears I will work——Yes, 'tis Maravelli," she added emphatically, "who shall become the executioner for us!"

With these words Mrs. Ranger rose from her seat, her eyes remaining fixed with a cold, glistening, reptile-like gaze upon the three girls, who, horror-stricken and dismayed, were huddling together as if in the presence of some spectral shape.

Then, having thus gazed as if to convince them that she was inspired with all the energy now needed for the working out of her desperate plans, Mrs. Ranger hurried from the room with a step as light and swift as that of youthfulness itself: and as the door closed behind her, the three sisters slowly turned their eyes upon each other with looks expressive of a horror beyond all power of description.

CHAPTER CLVI.

THE CRIME DEBATED.

STERN, resolute, and implacable in the purpose she had formed, Mrs. Ranger betook herself direct to the city; and on reaching the neighbourhood of Maravelli's abode, she entered a wine-shop, answering to the description of a London public-house, and desired to be shown to a private apartment. This demand was immediately complied with; and having ordered refreshments for the sake of appearances—though heaven knows she was in no humour to eat—she likewise directed writing-materials to be brought up. Then, having penned a hasty note to Maravelli, she despatched it by the waiter of the wine-shop, whom she charged to answer no questions which might be put to him by any person save the doctor himself.

The man departed to execute his commission; and in ten minutes he returned, followed by Dr.

Maravelli, whom he had found at home and who at once hastened to obey Mrs. Ranger's summons.

"My dear madam," said the physician, who had scarcely been able to conceal his agitation in the presence of the waiter, and who now gave free vent to his alarms the moment that individual had quitted the room,—"what, in heaven's name, means this mysterious proceeding? Why not come direct to my house as usual? why send for me hither? Ah! madam, a terrible presentiment of evil hangs upon my soul——"

"Sit down, sit down," said Mrs. Ranger, whose looks denoted a dark and sinister resolution. "We have much to talk about!"

"Good God! your tone and manner frighten me," said Maravelli, sinking upon a seat, as if in a state of exhaustion. "Would to heaven I never had anything to do with *that* business!"—and the wretched man writhed in agony upon the chair which he had just taken.

"Fool—idiot—coward!" said Mrs. Ranger, in the thick husky voice of subdued passion and contempt. "Is it thus that you show a worse than woman's weakness in the presence of tremendous dangers?"—and as she spoke she grasped his arm with her bony fingers, and griped it with a force as if it were in an iron vice.

"Dangers!" repeated the wretched man, shuddering with the very endeavour which he made to control his fears. "Ah! I knew there were dangers! I knew it—I knew it—the moment I received your note, so mysteriously sent, and so imperatively summoning me hither!"

"Yes—there *are* dangers," returned Mrs. Ranger, her voice suddenly changing from the huskiness of passion to the sepulchral depth of solemnity. "But if you are a man, and will show a man's courage, we can avert those perils—whereas, if you are weak-minded and show a craven spirit, ruin will overwhelm us all—not ruin for one, but ruin for two—three—all—all concerned! *Now* do you understand me—and will you be calm?"

"I will, I will," said the doctor.

At this moment the waiter re-entered the room, bearing refreshments and wine; and when he had retired again, Mrs. Ranger rose from her seat and examined the apartment carefully to see whether the walls were merely wooden partitions, or whether they were indeed thick enough to prevent their voices from being overheard in the adjoining rooms. Having satisfied herself on this head, she opened the door gently and looked forth into the passage: but no one was there. Thus convinced that there were no caves-droppers, she returned to her seat at the table where Maravelli was just tossing off a tumbler of wine in order to resuscitate his courage and his spirits.

"Now are you prepared to listen?" asked Mrs. Ranger.

"I am," was the response: and he certainly appeared to have found the fortitude which he sought in the juice of the grape.

"Take another glass," said Mrs. Ranger, who saw that the artificial stimulant would render him ductile and pliable to her purpose, more easily perhaps than even her own representations.

"There! now proceed," said the doctor, setting down the tumbler which he had emptied a second time. "I am prepared for something dreadful. Your look—your manner—your tone of voice, already seem to shadow forth some idea of a terrific nature."

"You are aware, doctor," said Mrs. Ranger, "that dangers *do* menace us?—you knew it even *before* you received my note?—and it was my note that worked you up to a pitch of feverish excitement? Come, confess the truth: was it not so?"—and she looked him hard in the face, as much as to say that it were useless to give a denial.

"Yes—you speak truly—too truly," returned the doctor hesitatingly.

"But *you* have betrayed the trust reposed in you?" she said, still gazing upon him with an intentness and fixity that seemed resolved not to allow the slightest change of feature on his part to escape her notice.

"What do you mean?—betray you?" he asked, stammering and blushing like a guilty man.

"In one word, doctor," said Mrs. Ranger, sternly and still with that fascinating look fixed upon him—but fascinating only as the reptile concentrates all the magnetic influence of its cold gleaming eyes upon the victim it is about to dart upon,—"in one word, you have betrayed all you know to a young Englishman who is living with you, named Jocelyn Loftus?"

"It is useless—utterly useless—nay, even worse than useless," said the doctor, "to deny anything. I will make up my mind to tell you all! Besides I see that you have some project in view——"

"Remember, doctor, that every minute is precious," interrupted Mrs. Ranger, in a warning voice. "Whatever you have done I will not reproach you for: 'tis past, and cannot be *undone*. But it can be amended or counteracted—and in this must you help me! Now proceed—and tell me frankly and candidly all you have said to this Jocelyn Loftus."

Dr. Maravelli thereupon commenced the required explanations. He stated how an English lady, bearing the fictitious name of *Roberts*, was living at his house—and how, as she desired change of scene, he had visited the adjacent village to purchase or hire a country residence which he might fit up for her accommodation. He went on to state how he had met Loftus there—how the young man had that same evening rescued Mrs. Roberts from a watery grave—and how he had become an inmate of his house. Then he detailed the particulars of the scene which had taken place between himself and Loftus—and how he had revealed all he knew concerning the incidents of the villa, and likewise Emma Owen's episodical adventure with the police. He next proceeded to describe how, late on the preceding night, Loftus had brought home the corpse of the child—how he had discovered the initials on the flannel-wrapper and the cambric handkerchief—and how he had deposited the body in the dissecting-room.

Mrs. Ranger was appalled at the narrative now revealed to her, and which showed how far advanced Jocelyn Loftus was in following up the clue that he was evidently pursuing to the unravelment of the whole complicated affair relative to the birth of the child. But composing her harrowed feelings, and recalling to her aid that more than feminine and even more than masculine resolution with which in her own criminal designs she had previously armed herself, she reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute upon all she had just heard.

"Do you know what this self-styled Mrs. Roberts' real name *is*?" she inquired at length.

"No," replied Maravelli: "but she has told me that she is a lady of rank, and that she until recently held a situation at the English Court. She is a fine handsome woman—five months advanced in pregnancy——"

"Ah! then it is evidently Lady Prescott," said Mrs. Ranger. "Though I have never seen her ladyship, yet, all things considered, she it must be! Did you notice whether she has been out this morning?"

"Yes—she was absent for upwards of an hour," answered the doctor; "and she had not returned more than twenty minutes when your note was delivered at my house. She looked agitated——"

"Ah! it is the same then," ejaculated Mrs. Ranger. "A deep mysterious understanding exists between her and Jocelyn Loftus——"

"Methought so," exclaimed the doctor: "for this morning they were alone together in the drawing-room with writing-materials, before she went out; and immediately she returned he was evidently waiting about in the hall to receive her."

"Has any visitor called for Mr. Loftus within the last half-hour?" inquired Mrs. Ranger, now thinking of Bergami.

"Yes a few minutes before your note came:"—and the physician proceeded to give a description of the royal equerry. "This individual," he added, "was closetted with Mr. Loftus at the moment I left my house. But now, for heaven's sake! relieve my impatience and tell me what mean all these questions?—what has been found out—what perils menace us——"

"Answer me one query first," said Mrs. Ranger: then fixing her eyes steadily and searchingly upon the doctor, she asked, "Who do you *now* believe was the mother of that child——"

"From what Mr. Loftus said, and considering all the evidences," answered Maravelli, "I can no longer believe that the Princess——"

"Enough! Well, it is useless to sustain the cheat any longer. No, it is useless! Instead of studying how to implicate the Princess," she continued in a musing tone, "the Owens and I must think how we are best to get out of this scrape. Doctor," she went on to say, "Agatha Owen, the eldest of the three sisters, was your patient on that night when upwards of three weeks ago you were introduced to the villa. It matters not now to explain why a cheat was practised on you, and wherefore it was sought to make you believe that it was the Princess herself whom you were engaged to assist through the ordeal of maternity——"

"But the dangers which menace us—what of *them?*" asked Maravelli, his impatience, or rather his terrors, now once more rising to a feverish pitch. "Who was that handsome man who came ere now to call upon Mr. Loftus? He gave no name, but introduced himself as one having important business."

"It is the Baron Bergami, the Princess's equerry," answered Mrs. Ranger. "Have you never seen him before?"

"Methought I recollected his features—but I was not sure," answered Maravelli. "I have been so agitated all the morning—so full of misgivings and apprehensions after that fearful incident of last night—I mean the bringing home of that child's corpse—that my brain has been clouded and my recollections all thrown into disorder. Yes—now I remember—I have seen that handsome man at a distance on one occasion, following the Princess's retinue. But what, in heaven's name, does he seek with Loftus?"

"Lady Prescott—that is your Mrs. Roberts," resumed Mrs. Ranger, "has been to the villa this morning——"

"And all is discovered—all is exposed?" exclaimed Maravelli, trembling from head to foot.

"Yes—no—that is, it *will* be—and ruin must overtake us all——"

"Then what is to be done?" interrupted Maravelli.

"Hush! not so loud—we shall be overheard——"

"But let us fly—let us fly!" hastily resumed the frightened physician. "We will depart together—I will help you to escape—for escape we must! Do you know the penalties which we have incurred? *I*, branding—yes, branding with a red hot iron——O God! searing deep down into the flesh——besides imprisonment——and *you* imprisonment also——and those three girls——Oh! it is too horrible to contemplate——Let us fly!"

"Fly! Coward, fool!" said Mrs. Ranger, again making use of those epithets of scorn, and again speaking in a voice that was thick and husky; "whither can we fly? Must we not go with passports?—should we not be traced—pursued—overtaken——"

"True——My God! too true," groaned Maravelli, now wringing his hands in despair.

"Will you be calm?" asked Mrs. Ranger, once more griping him by the wrist, but now shaking him violently. "Look you—I am not cast down—I am not yielding to despair. And why? Because I know that, desperate as are the perils which menace us, they may be averted—counteracted! The game is *not* altogether in the hands of our enemies: we can yet play it out for ourselves—aye, and win it too," she added with a malignant leer.

"Oh! if this be really true?" said Maravelli, clasping in hopefulness the hands which he had a few moments back wrung in despair. "But what makes you think that the dangers can be averted?"

"Because," replied Mrs. Ranger, in a tone of assurance, "I can penetrate to a certain extent the policy which Loftus is pursuing. He does not mean to expose and ruin us fully—unless as a last resource: but he purposes to intimidate—to terrify——"

"Yes, I see!" exclaimed the doctor! "If he had really meant mischief he would at once have gone to the police-authorities and told all he knew. But what guarantee have we that he will not do so even now before we can possibly adopt any counteractive plan?"

"Rest assured," returned Mrs. Ranger, "that Jocelyn will do nothing of a decisive character for the present moment. Bergami is now with him, you say? Well, there will be consultations—negotiations—intimidations—and so forth. These will spread over some hours. It is now nearly three o'clock in the afternoon—night is not very far distant—and when night *does* arrive——"

But here Mrs. Ranger stopped short, and her looks simultaneously became so awfully sinister and darkly significant that Maravelli shuddered as if the words which she had yet to speak were already spoken.

"This night?" he murmured in a scarcely audible voice.

"Yes—this night, Loftus and Lady Prescott must die!" rejoined Mrs. Ranger, in a low deep tone.

"Is there nothing else to be done but *that?*" asked Maravelli, whose voice had now sunk to a whisper.

"Nothing!" replied the dreadful woman, who was thus inciting him to a deed of darkest horror. "If you would escape branding with a red hot iron——"

"Enough!" murmured Maravelli, writhing. "I do indeed comprehend that there is no alternative. But Bergami——"

"Leave *him* to me," answered Mrs. Ranger. "You do *your* part of the work and I will do *mine.* Let Loftus and Lady Prescott die this night—mind, this night that is coming—without fail—and I promise that never again shall you hear a syllable of these startling things. Surely you have some subtle poison which you can cunningly mingle with their drink?"

"There are many ways of dealing death," answered Maravelli: "and you may rest assured that I shall adopt the one that is safest."

"Then hasten back now to your own abode," said Mrs. Ranger: "and again I say, if you wish to avoid the searing-iron, flinch not—fail not!"

"Loftus and the English lady have but a few hours to live!" replied Maravelli, throwing upon Mrs. Ranger a look full of the darkest and most ominous meaning.

He then took his departure from the wine-shop, and Mrs. Ranger likewise issued forth at the expiration of about five minutes. But although she returned in the direction of the villa, she did not immediately re-enter it, but walked about at a little distance and in a spot where she might observe the two or three approaches from the city—namely, the main road that passed in front of the house, the shore of the lake, and the bye road which led at the back through the fields—so that she knew that Baron Bergami could not possibly return to the villa unperceived by her, unless indeed he remained out till it was dark. But this she did not anticipate. Astute, deep, and penetrating, she calculated that Bergami would hear from Jocelyn all that the latter had to say—that they would then confer deliberately upon the course to be adopted under the circumstances—but that whatever was resolved upon, would be with a view of avoiding scandal and exposure as much as possible for all parties. Mrs. Ranger therefore felt tolerably well assured that after Bergami had seen Loftus he would return direct to the villa; and under this impression was it that she now waited to intercept him in the manner described.

But in the interval we must see what was really taking place between the royal equerry and Jocelyn Loftus.

CHAPTER CLVII.

THE CONFESSION OF ROMANTIC LOVE.

Our hero was in earnest conversation with Lady Prescott, whom we shall no longer call Mrs. Roberts, in the drawing-room at the physician's house, when a servant entered to announce that a gentleman desired to see him on the most particular business. Thereupon Lady Prescott said, "You had better see him here, whoever he may be: for indeed I have a presentiment that it is some one from the royal villa. I will repair in the meantime to Mrs. Montague's chamber and have a conversation with her."

Lady Prescott used the name of *Mrs. Montague* because she did not know that Jocelyn was aware who this said Mrs. Montague really was. But the truth is that the moment he had seen her that morning he *did* recognize her: for he had beheld her on the mimic stage that night when circumstances made him a spectator of the private theatricals at Carlton House. But the self-styled Mrs. Montague herself did *not* know Jocelyn Loftus: nor had she noticed him amongst the spectators, concealed as he was under the gallery, on the occasion referred to. Of course Jocelyn had not appeared to recognize her, but had passed through the ceremony of introduction (which was performed by Lady Prescott) with every semblance of being a perfect stranger and entirely ignorant who she really was. Nevertheless, we must add he had been much astonished at beholding *that lady* as an inmate of Dr. Maravelli's house.

Having parenthetically recorded these few but necessary observations, we may return to the thread of our narrative.

Jocelyn Loftus, acting upon Lady Prescott's suggestion, desired the servant to show up the gentleman at once—while her ladyship repaired to the chamber of Mrs. Montague. In a few minutes Baron Bergami was introduced; and on announcing his name, he was welcomed with becoming courtesy by our young hero.

"Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales has commanded me to seek you, Mr. Loftus," began the equerry, "for the purpose of conferring with you——"

"In pursuance of the letter which I wrote, and the one which mine enclosed?" said Loftus, whose joy at the progressive success of his plans rendered him impatient to enter upon the requisite explanations.

"The one which you wrote!" observed Baron Bergami in surprise: then instantaneously recollecting how Agatha Owen had picked up the envelope, he exclaimed with an unwonted degree of excitement, "Ah! I understand! You must have written on the paper serving as the envelope of the epistle from the Princess Sophia?"

"I did so," rejoined Loftus: "for I was fearful that if there were several enclosures, one might so easily drop or be mislaid."

"Then what you partially apprehended, did really occur," continued the Baron: "for the envelope was dropped unread—picked up by Miss Agatha Owen—and taken away by her."

"Ah! then perhaps you are unacquainted with its contents?" said Jocelyn inquiringly: and as

Bergami nodded an affirmative to the question, he proceeded to state exactly what he had written in the envelope.

"Now, Mr. Loftus," said Bergami, "you will pardon me for telling you at the very outset of our interview, that your character has been much blackened in the opinion of the Princess of Wales; and this evil impression which she has conceived, was not improved ere now by the appearance of Lady Prescott as your messenger—inasmuch as she is in a condition——"

"I have indeed learnt from her ladyship's lips how cruelly she was exposed," said Jocelyn. "It may appear indiscreet, improper, and even indecent for me to have entrusted my mission to her ladyship under the circumstances: but I felt assured that I myself could not obtain access to her Royal Highness—I knew not how to forward the Princess Sophia's letter to her with the certainty that it would reach her own hands—and when you have heard all I am about to narrate, you will admit, Baron Bergami, that the affair is of an importance too grave and too vital to have allowed me to hesitate at any punctilio or formality in my endeavour to convey that document *direct* to the Princess. As for the aspersions on my own character, you shall presently judge of what value they are and what faith is to be put in them."

Jocelyn Loftus then proceeded, circumstantially and minutely, to relate all that he had discovered—all that he had done—all that he had endured—and all that he now proposed to do, in respect to the affairs of the Princess of Wales. He began by stating who he really was—wherefore he had adopted a fictitious name—and why he had abjured his real one. He went on to explain how he had first fallen in with Mary Owen, from whose lips he learnt all the particulars of the conspiracy existing against the Princess of Wales—how he had accompanied Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen from Calais to Paris—how he had been the object of their licentious advances—how he had been imprisoned in the Prefecture, where Julia had practised her arts under the name of Laura Linden—how he had been rescued from his captivity—how he had returned to England and procured the letter of introduction from the Princess Sophia—how he had set off on a second expedition to the Continent, but had been arrested and imprisoned at Grenoble until within the last few days—how, on obtaining his release, he had sped towards Geneva—and how he had fallen in with Lady Prescott, which circumstance had led to his taking up his abode at Dr. Maravelli's house.

Of course he delicately suppressed the fact that Lady Prescott had attempted self-destruction; and without committing himself to an untruth he glanced over the event in such a manner which left Bergami to surmise that it was an accidental fall into the water. Continuing his narrative, he related the startling things which he had learnt and which had happened since his arrival beneath the physician's roof—describing all that he had elicited from Maravelli, the fishing up of the dead child, and the telltale initials on the flannel-wrapper and the cambric handkerchief.

To say that Bergami was amazed, were to say nothing: but to describe him as passing through a strange series of exciting phases of feeling, as Jocelyn successively developed the incidents of his narrative, were to convey a better idea of the effect which it produced on the equerry. But some parts of the disclosure struck him as if a thunderbolt had fallen at his feet, filling him with stupor and amazement—while others made his blood boil with indignation—and others, again, filled him with horror and dismay. The veil of a tremendous mystery had been drawn aside; and the things that it revealed were startling, surprising, hideous, exciting, revolting, and monstrous to a degree. That the meshes of a dark, deep, damnable conspiracy had been insidiously woven about the Princess of Wales, was clear enough: that the three Misses Owen, beneath the air of sprightliness, affability, and good-humour, concealed the blackest hearts, the worst passions, and the most dissolute lives, was also evident;—and that they had with a truly fiend-like cunning and with the most exquisite combination of a demoniac duplicity, managed to throw upon the Princess all the scandal of their own actions, was not the less apparent. But while passing through the various stages of successive emotions produced by the fearful narrative which had just been developed, Baron Bergami had experienced an under-current of feeling made up of admiration for the excellent young man who had so heroically, so generously, and so nobly devoted himself to the cause of the injured Princess of Wales.

"In the name of Her Royal Highness, Mr. Loftus—since by that name you choose to be called," said the Baron, "do I thank you—most sincerely, most profoundly—for this chivalrous conduct on your part! Had it not been for you, the fatal web of the most infernal conspiracy the world ever saw, would have been so woven about this injured Princess that the aims of her enemies must have been triumphantly accomplished in insuring her disgrace, ruin, and downfall. To you, then, she now owes everything—her honour, which is dearer to her than her life! Pardon me—pardon me, if I speak in terms of excitement: but it is because I am inspired with an enthusiastic admiration of your conduct that I thus give utterance to my feelings!"

"I have told you candidly, Baron Bergami," said Loftus, after a few suitable words in acknowledgment of the thanks tendered him by the royal equerry, "that scandal, not content with attributing to her Royal Highness all the profligacies whereof the three sisters have been guilty, has coupled *your* name with the Princess's."

"Heavens!" exclaimed the royal equerry, starting from his seat with indignation and excitement: "no calumny can be more foul—no slander more detestable! Ah! Mr. Loftus, that I have loved her," he continued, "is but too true! When a mere youth, I was appointed secretary to the Prussian Envoy at the Court of Brunswick. In the chapel at the ducal palace did I behold the Princess Caroline for the first time: and I believe there can be no sin in confessing that she made a deep impression upon my heart. I loved her—and my love grew into a worship, intense—profound—yet delicate, and pure, and holy, as the love of angels! I thought not of her as a woman—but as a being of a nature infinitely superior to my own. I loved her, in fine, as a visionary may love a shadowy sylph or spiritual wood-nymph in the depths of the forest. That she comprehended my passion is beyond all doubt; and that she reciprocated it too," continued Bergami, his voice, which was so fine in its masculine melody, now gradually sink-

ing to the lowest flute-like innotations, "is likewise certain. On one occasion she dropped a flower from the ducal pew in the chapel at Brunswick. I picked it up, and placed it next to my heart. No one beheld this little incident—or at all events, no one attached any importance to it, save herself; and in *her* looks—in the blushes too, which rose up on her cheeks—did I read the sentiment of pleasure which this proof of my devotion excited in her heart. Without reflecting on the consequences—without pausing to remember that she never could be mine, and that this love-worship on my part could only lead to misery, disappointment, and despair—I continued to pursue my path of infatuation. I lived only for the moment—and if that moment were filled with the bliss of her image, and lighted by the soft glory of her smile, I cared not what change the next might bring. When I say *care not*, I am wrong: I should have said *thought not*. I was fascinated—enchanted: a spell was upon me. It was not that my vanity was flattered in being thus tenderly noticed by a Princess. No—because I boasted of it to no one: it was my own secret—I cherished it in my heart of hearts—enshrined it as the idol of my worship in the sanctuary of my soul. Then—I will not say *with the folly of a youthful lover who fancies himself a poet*, because there can be no folly where the sentiment is so pure, so refined, so devoid of selfishness as that which I cherished—but I will say *with the indiscretion of a young adorer who pours forth a natural worship to his divinity*, I embodied all I felt in rapturous glowing verse. For, ah! poetry is the language of nature: it is from every grand as well as from every pleasing, interesting, and touching feature in the natural world that the poet drinks in his inspirations. Oh! believe me, he could not create a world of his own from the efforts of imagination, unless he were deeply embued with a sense of all that is sublime, delightful, and lovely in the aspect of nature. For there is poetry in the heavens, when in the gorgeousness of its own light the sun proclaims in golden voice the power of the Eternal—or at night when the moon and stars give forth in silver accents the same adoring hymn. There is poetry in the sea when it speaks in the murmurs of its ripples, or thunders forth in the portentous voice of its sounding billows. There is poetry in the storm—there is poetry in the green fields, the waving woods, and the delicious gardens: and there is poetry of the sublimest and the loftiest character amidst the mountains that rear their heads to heaven—those heads that wear the coronals of eternal snow! Poetry, then, is everywhere: it is the voice in which nature speaks—the mute eloquence which has far more expression and goes more deeply down into the heart, than the chorus of ten thousand human tongues. No wonder, then was it that in the voice of poesy did I seek to convey all those feelings which are so ineffable otherwise. Besides, it was the only manner in which I could communicate with the Princess. Nor was it even *direct* to her that the verses were sent: but it was to one of her ladies-in-waiting that I enclosed my tender effusions. I knew that this lady's vanity would induce her to show the poems to the Princess; and I also knew that the Princess would not fail to comprehend them. Nor was I mistaken: the looks with which I was rewarded in the ducal chapel, and the occasional dropping of a flower unperceived by all present save myself,—*these* were the tokens that my verses had been read and were acceptable—these also were my reward!"*

Here Baron Bergami paused for a few minutes, during which he paced the room in a mood of the deepest abstraction. He forgot who was present—he forgot wherefore he had come thither—forgot the important topic of discourse whence his own feelings had hurried him divergingly away—forgot everything save the reminiscences which had been thus conjured up, and which came crowding back upon his soul, all absorbing, and with a tenderness that was ineffable! Lottus could not interrupt him—dared not break in upon this reverie—for it was too solemn and sacred for intrusion; although time was now of such importance and every minute that was slipping away could be so ill spared from earnest deliberation or positive action in the cause of the Princess of Wales.

"This delicious dream," continued Bergami, slowly and mournfully resuming the thread of his discourse, "lasted for nearly eighteen months: and will you believe that during this period never once did I speak to the Princess—never were we near enough to each other to exchange a single syllable? I was but the secretary to a second-rate diplomatic agent at a proud Court; and although my rank is noble, yet was I never invited as a guest to the ducal table. Suddenly the intelligence began to be whispered about in Brunswick that negotiations had been opened with the British Court relative to the marriage of her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Then was I immediately ordered by the Prussian Government to quit Brunswick and repair to Vienna, to take the post of secretary to the Prussian Legation in that city. By some means the romantic attachment which had sprung up between myself and the Princess had become either whispered about or else suspected; and hence my sudden removal to Vienna. Then did I awake from this long dream of bliss—awake to find that I had been clinging to a shadow—immolating my happiness on an ideal altar. Bitterly did I curse my folly in having given way to such a delusion: and yet a delusion it scarcely can be called—for though I had loved so tenderly and had evidently been loved in return, I had not cherished any definite hope. Indeed, I had never thought of asking myself why I loved and to what I expected my love would lead. Thus I had not deluded myself—and assuredly the Princess had not deluded me. But I will not attempt to analyse the feelings which I experienced when thus abruptly removed from the Court of Brunswick. I may however mention that I at once resolved to renounce all idea of obtruding myself upon the Princess's notice again. Indeed, I prayed—fervently prayed—that she might forget me, so as to be enabled to give up her thoughts wholly and undividedly to the husband whom expediency and diplomacy had selected for her. I heard of her marriage: next I heard that she was unhappy: then I heard that she had given

* See Letter containing the particulars of this amour supposed to have been sent from a correspondent at Brunswick to the Prince of Wales, in No. 75, of the *First Series* of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT:" namely, page 179, Vol. ii.

birth to a daughter, and that even this circumstance had failed to endear her royal husband to her. Years and years elapsed: I had opportunities of pushing my way in the world—but my mind had grown too unsettled to allow me to take advantage of them. I abandoned my diplomatic career and joined the Prussian army. Without vanity I can say that the credentials I possess are those of which any military man may be proud. In a short time I rose to the rank of Captain, and fought in all the dread campaigns in which Prussia bore her part against Napoleon. But if I had abandoned the seclusion of the diplomatic cabinet in order to fly from thought, I assuredly had gained nothing by the change: for my pursuer followed me through all the mazes of war, even into the ranks of battle! At length the abdication of Napoleon at Fontainbleau and his retirement to Elba gave a short peace to Europe—that peace which is now to be disturbed again by the wild ambition of this meteor-man whom it is impossible not to admire and gaze up to as the mightiest of warriors, the greatest of heroes, and the grandest of emperors! Quitting the army at the time of the abdication, I visited Italy for my amusement; and some months ago I was suddenly startled by the intelligence that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was travelling in the same country, and was indeed daily expected at the same city where I then was. I was now seized with feelings which I cannot attempt to describe. Suffice it to say that I was impelled by an irresistible power to see the Princess. Against this impulse I struggled for several days: but it grew stronger than myself—and yielding to it, I proceeded to the hotel at which she had taken up her quarters. On sending up my card, I was at once admitted to her presence; and she received me with a frank affability and a warm-hearted candour which seemed to say as plainly as looks and actions can possibly have a meaning, '*I receive you as an old friend. In the name of friendship, welcome! There must be an eternal silence, if not oblivion, with regard to that episode in our lives which dates more than twenty years back!*' I understood her meaning; and a great change was suddenly worked within me. Instead of the restlessness of a disappointed passion, I felt as if I had drunk of the holiest balm of Christian resignation. An anodyne had been all in a moment administered to a heart the wound of which for long years had remained open. Friendship!—to possess the friendship of the Princess would now be more than a recompense for all that I had endured: it would make me happy! She appeared to be animated with exactly the same feelings; and treating me in the light of a friend, she inquired what I was doing—how I was engaged—what were my pursuits; and then delicately touched upon my means of existence. With equal candour did I answer her, making her aware that I had nothing but my half-pay as a Prussian officer, and a small pension which I had received in acknowledgment of services rendered during the war. Thereupon she proposed that I should enter her service as principal equerry—that office being at the moment vacant. I accepted the offer—accepted it at once, because it was made so frankly and so kindly. To have refused it, I must have stated some reason; and as I was poor, out of employment, and totally disengaged, I could invent no excuse of a legitimate character. Much less dared I confess that having loved her in my earlier years—having loved her too ever since—and having continued unmarried in order to remain faithful to that romantic love of mine, I dared not accept a post which would constantly retain me about her person. Under these circumstances, therefore—and impelled by such considerations—I at once replied in the affirmative: and behold me installed as equerry in the establishment of that Princess whose image had dwelt in my heart for more than twenty years! Now, candidly speaking, Mr. Loftus, I will admit that there was possibly some little indiscretion—"

"Pardon me for interrupting you, Baron Bergami," said our hero: "but I think that you have exculpated yourself from any blame—even the slightest—in respect to taking office in the household of the Princess. But that her Royal Highness was somewhat indiscreet in making the proposal to you, I certainly think."

"Consider, Mr. Loftus, that she is of the most artless, unsuspecting disposition," exclaimed Bergami. "Harbouring no guile herself, she is never the first to look for it elsewhere; and her very candour and frankness frequently make her the creature of impulse, so that she is thoughtless in her actions. But, Mr. Loftus," added Bergami, suddenly drawing himself up to his full height and gazing upon our hero with a look of noble ingenuousness, "you will believe me when, as a man of honour, a nobleman, and an officer, I declare unto you that never since I have thus been in the service of her Royal Highness, has a single look or word passed between us in any way calculated to revive the memories of the past! Whatever may be felt in either heart, is profoundly concealed; nor have I the vanity to suppose that the romantic love of the Princess has survived the period when it was characterised by so many singular but delicate traits at the ducal palace at Brunswick. Of *this* however enough! You believe, Mr. Loftus, my solemn word?"

"You need not, Baron Bergami," exclaimed our hero, "do such violence to your own feelings as to enter upon self-vindication in this respect. As for her Royal Highness, not for a moment is it necessary that you should repudiate on her behalf all the vile scandals and atrocious calumnies which have recently been propagated concerning her. From what I have this day narrated, and from all that I have succeeded in learning since the moment I set foot in Geneva, it is clear enough that those three fiends in angel-shapes and bearing the name of Owen, are the authoresses of the scandal, the guilt, and the infamy!"

"Yes—true—too true!" said Bergami. "But how do you propose to proceed in vindicating her Royal Highness, and punishing the guilty ones?"

"In order to unmask the conspiracy," returned Jocelyn, "we must obtain a thorough insight into all its details, so that every single point at all affecting the character of the Princess may be fully cleared up. Now then, let us see what it is that scandal alleges against her. In the first place it is averred that she has been secretly delivered of a child: but this we shall assuredly be enabled to bring home to Agatha Owen. Se-

condly, it is declared by calumny that the Princess has received several lovers into the villa: but we shall prove that these gallants have been invited thither by the Misses Owen. Thirdly, the tongue of scandal affirms that her Royal Highness has intrigued with you, Baron Bergami, and that you have been seen proceeding along the passage in the villa at night-time to her Royal Highness's apartment. *This point we are not as yet in a condition to clear up.* That we know the allegation to be false, is one thing: but to make the world believe it so, is another. That the scandalous imputation emanates from the Owens, there is no doubt. With them, too, is leagued that mother of crime, Mrs. Ranger: and she appears to have an accomplice in Mrs. Hubbard, who, as I have already told you, bore her part in the adventures of that night when Maravelli was introduced to the villa. It were well then, Baron, if you were to demand explanations of this Mrs. Hubbard and compel her to confess all she knows."

"I will do so," answered Bergami.

"Perhaps," continued Loftus, "her revelations may throw some further light upon the subject. At all events, you have too much sensibility, delicacy, and good taste, not to feel how important it is that the particular allegation relative to the Princess and yourself should be cleared up."

"I do indeed appreciate the justice and the good sense of all you say, Mr. Loftus," responded Bergami; "and depend upon it I will do my best to exonerate her Royal Highness from that gross and scandalous imputation."

"In this respect, then, I must leave you to act according to circumstances," said Loftus. "Meanwhile I shall not remain idle. For you must understand that although we have every reason to suppose it was indeed Agatha Owen who gave

birth to the child, we are not *yet* in a condition fully to prove it. That her sister Emma disposed of the corpse in the lake, is beyond all doubt; and that it was wrapped in a garment belonging to Agatha, is equally certain. But still these evidences do not place the main point beyond *all* doubt. It might still be alleged that as the Miss Owens were in the confidence of the Princess, those little circumstances just mentioned were natural enough. It is therefore necessary to obtain a *confession* from the lips of the sisters; and this cannot be elicited from them by suasion or remonstrance—no, nor even by mere threats and menaces of exposure. All *these* they have no doubt firmly made up their minds to dare and defy. It can therefore only be under extraordinary circumstances of terror, best calculated to make a sudden and awful impression upon the mind—to give the mind, indeed, a sudden shock, and unnerve it by the abrupt development of a spectacle of horror—it is only by such means as these, I say, that a full and complete confession can be extorted from the lips of those three depraved and heartless young women. Now, Baron Bergami, do you begin to understand why I have retained the loathsome corpse of that child beneath this roof?—why I have deposited it in the dissecting-room as the most fitting place for such an object to be viewed?"

"Yes—I understand your motives now," answered Bergami. "You purpose by some means or other to entice the three sisters hither——"

"Such is my object," replied Loftus. "Had I personally been sent for by the Princess to-day, as I had hoped would be the result of Lady Prescott's visit, I should have contented myself for the moment by revealing to her Royal Highness enough to place her at once upon her guard as a preliminary to the complete revelation of all details when my plans are matured. I should then have sought a secret opportunity of inducing the three sisters, by means of dark and mysterious threats, to come to Dr. Maravelli's house this night. But now, from the turn which events have taken, these results must be brought about through other means. In plain terms, Baron Bergami, it is now for *you* to enter actively into co-operation with *me* in carrying out my aims. To *you*, then, must I intrust the task of inducing or compelling the three sisters—Agatha, Emma, and Julia—to come hither this night!"

"I will do so," was Bergami's prompt reply.

"Good!" ejaculated Loftus. "Now then let us understand each other thoroughly. At midnight punctually the three sisters must be at the front door of this house: for midnight is the hour when the mind, by a variety of influences and associations, is most sensitive to the overpowering effect of circumstances of horror."

"At midnight," rejoined Bergami, "those three young women shall be at the front door of Maravelli's house——At least, so far as it will depend upon myself to urge, coerce, or persuade them. As a matter of course, no means must be left untried. If I find that they are more accessible to cajolery than to threats, I will use the former: but at all events I will do my best to ensure their presence here."

"I shall rely upon you," said Loftus: "for remember how much depends upon the success of this feature in our plan, and how vitally important it is to wring from those girls the whole truth relative to the child, so as to relieve the character of the Princess from so serious an aspersion."

"I appreciate and understand all you say," remarked Bergami: "and I shall now speed back to the villa to perform the part which you have entrusted to me."

"But be careful, Baron," said Loftus, "in what you may reveal to the Princess. It would be unwise to tell her everything at once. These are things that should only be broken by degrees—for they are but too well calculated to prove overpowering to a sensitive mind."

"This suggestion on your part shall I also follow," said Bergami. "Indeed, I will so manage matters that the Princess shall not at once be plunged into an inordinate degree of excitement. Moreover, it will perhaps be as well that the Misses Owen should not be allowed to perceive how *very* serious matters are becoming—lest they should hesitate to come this night to Maravelli's house to see you."

After a little additional discourse upon the details of the plan now in execution, Baron Bergami took his leave of Jocelyn Loftus; and quitting the house, he retraced his way in the direction of the villa.

CHAPTER CLVIII.

THE PRINCESS.—MRS. HUBBARD.

While pursuing his path homeward, the Baron was suddenly aroused from a reverie of a deep, absorbing, and painful character, by hearing his name mentioned. He looked up, and beheld Mrs. Ranger.

This lady had never been a favourite of Bergami's. Not that he was a man who formed opinions without a motive, or who easily surrendered himself up to prejudices and antipathies: but he certainly had never been inclined to entertain a high opinion of Mrs. Ranger. Now that he had discovered from Jocelyn's revelation that she was a perfect Hecate of iniquity, he recoiled with a sudden sensation of loathing as he thus found himself in her presence. But almost at the self-same instant did the thought flash to his mind that he might to some extent make use of this woman, in respect to the purpose which he had in view relative to the Owens; and conquering his repugnance accordingly, he acknowledged her salutation.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Ranger immediately saw that the Baron felt a loathing at her presence, and that even this act of courtesy which he had just performed—reserved, constrained, and cold as it seemed—was a forced effort and not a spontaneous politeness.

"Something unpleasant has occurred, Baron," she said, accosting him in such a manner as to show she desired to lead him into conversation.

"Yes, Mrs. Ranger," responded Bergami, fixing his eyes with a look of deep meaning upon her: "something unpleasant *has* indeed occurred."

"You have seen Mr. Loftus and Lady Prescott?" asked Mrs. Ranger, eagerly.

"I have not seen Lady Prescott since she was at the villa ere now: but I have seen Mr. Loftus. How knew you that he was at Geneva?"

"Now, Baron," said Mrs. Ranger hastily, "do not let us stand here wasting precious time in asking questions and trying to draw each other out. But tell me at once the amount of mischief that exists and how it may be remedied. Do everything you can to avoid scandal; and I will give my best assistance in any way that lies in my power."

"Well then, to speak with equal candour," answered Bergami, "I will tell you that there is a considerable amount of mischief suspected and into the depths of which Mr. Loftus and I are determined to penetrate. Your three young friends the Misses Owen are implicated——"

"Ah! poor dear creatures," ejaculatsd Mrs. Ranger. "But remember how young they are, and make allowances for them! You would not seek to ruin them? Spare them—at all events give them time to reflect upon the atonement they may make for any amount of mischief they have already done."

"Now, Mrs. Ranger," said Bergami, "I do not wish to proceed with unnecessary harshness nor precipitation; and I think you are aware of Mr. Loftus's disposition——"

"Ah! *he* is a kind, good, excellent young man," said Mrs. Ranger. "But what does he mean to do? —what course is he adopting? Perhaps he believes that the poor girls are far more guilty than they really are?"

"To give you a proof that he does not wish to act with cruel abruptness or unfeeling precipitation," said Bergami, "I will at once inform you that he desires to have an interview with these young ladies —to reason with them—to learn from their own lips the extent of their misdeeds—and to see in what manner scandal may be avoided. In a word, he has consented to see them, and has left it to me to make some appointment with them to that effect."

"Shall I bear a message to them for you, Baron?" asked Mrs. Ranger, inwardly chuckling at the certainty which she now acquired that no *immediate* step was to be taken with regard to the fearful matters, wherein she, as well as the Owens, was so mixed up. "Or would you prefer seeing them at once yourself? It were perhaps better——"

"Yes—it would be better," said Bergami, adopting a musing tone, as if he deliberated upon the point, instead of having already made up his mind to it: then consulting his watch, he said, "It is now past three o'clock. Tell the young ladies that in order to avoid unpleasant observation, I will meet them at five punctually on the shore of the lake ——near that old jetty which we see yonder," he added, after sweeping his eyes around in search of a specific place of appointment.

"Your message shall be faithfully delivered; and I promise you the girls shall be punctually there. But may I hope—indeed, am I to understand from the remark you have just made, that you do not purpose to vex and annoy our dear Princess——"

"Madam," interrupted the Baron sternly; for the mingled hypocrisy and effrontery of the woman was more than he could patiently endure—"you must be well aware that I have learnt too much to believe for a single instant that you or the three sisters have any regard, love, or pity for the Princess. Nevertheless, madam, I do not object to inform you that it is my intention to deal delicately, warily, and cautiously with her Royal Highness in respect to the terrible things which have come to my knowledge. I will even add that provided the Misses Owen follow in all things the course which I shall presently point out to them, they shall—at least until to-morrow—be guaranteed against exposure to the Princess."

"Ah! this is most kind—most considerate on your part!" exclaimed Mrs. Ranger. "But, my dear Baron, will you not tell me exactly how matters stand——"

"I have no more to say at present," interrupted the royal equerry, with a coldness and sternness that precluded any farther observation on the harridan's part. "We are both about returning to the villa," he added: "but there are different paths to reach the same point."

Thereupon he quickly passed Mrs. Ranger by, and hastened along the main road towards the villa, while she took the path across the fields.

For the present we will follow Bergami, who, on reaching the villa, immediately sought the Princess: and this was the first time he had found himself alone with her since he had been in her service. She was in a parlour the window of which opened on the lawn in front of the house and commanded a magnificent view of the lake and all the surrounding scenery. But to the beauties of nature her attention was not given though her eyes were fixed thereon: for the incident of noon had troubled her sorely, and the longer she meditated upon it the greater became her misgivings and her alarms.

"Ah! Baron, I am so glad you have returned!" she exclaimed, the moment he entered the room. "Having written a long letter to my dearest daughter Charlotte, and another to my sister-in-law Sophia, I came and shut myself up alone in this room to *think* in solitude. Ah! and *thinking* is oft-times so mournful—so sad—especially when aught has arisen to fill the mind with new apprehensions—fresh misgivings——But what have you done? whom have you seen? Speak—tell me—I am in a flutter of excitement!"

"I cannot obey your Royal Highness so speedily," said the Baron, with the profoundest respect. "Indeed, considering what I have heard, I think it would be far more prudent if your Royal Highness would restrain your impatience until to-morrow; and then I shall be better enabled——"

"But tell me—am I menaced by any danger?" asked the Princess, with a visible tremor.

"No, madam—solemnly and sacredly, no!"

"Then is my mind at once set at ease," rejoined the Princess, her looks instantaneously brightening up: "and you may either tell me as much as you choose to unveil—or nothing at all, if you prefer I should wait until to-morrow. I know that you are my friend, Baron; and therefore I place unlimited confidence in you."

Bergami bowed, saying in a voice which betrayed the deep emotion that he felt, "Depend upon it, madam, I will never betray the trust with which you honour me."

As he thus spoke, with his looks cast down, a sigh—an ill-subdued and but half-stifled sigh—fell upon his ear,—but scarcely more audibly than the scared leaf of autumn, when falling from the tree, kisses the ground beneath; and like that scared leaf cast off from the withering tree, was the sigh thus thrown from the Princess's heart!

"Then you have seen Lady Prescott again?—or you have seen Mr. Loftus?" she immediately exclaimed in a hurried manner, and scarcely knowing what she said, so tumultuous were the feelings which had suddenly arisen up in her soul.

"Yes, madam," responded Bergami, who all in a moment had regained his wonted presence of mind: for he saw the precipice upon which they both stood and hastened by the ceremonial courtesy of his manner to raise up again the barrier of etiquette which had been for an instant borne down by the strong gush of feeling fresh from the heart's fountains. "Yes, madam, I have seen Mr. Loftus; and permit me at once to inform your Royal Highness that a more chivalrous, high-minded young man than he breathes not the air of this world. As for the aspersions thrown out against his character, they are naught but the vilest calumnies——"

"Then the Owens have deceived me—and Mrs. Ranger has deceived me?" cried the Princess, with mingled anger and amazement.

"You have been deceived, madam—and duped in many, many ways," responded Bergami. "But the crisis is now come; and thanks to this much maligned but really virtuous and admirable Jocelyn Loftus, your enemies will succumb and you shall achieve a proud triumph. More than this I would rather not say at present; and it were also well if your Royal Highness would assume your usual demeanour, and not allow those around you to perceive that anything extraordinary is taking place."

"I will follow your counsel, Baron, in all things," she answered.

Bergami then bowed, and at once quitted the apartment without raising his eyes towards the Princess.

Ascending the stairs, he reached the second storey and made straight for Mrs. Hubbard's room, where he found her solacing herself with a little drop of brandy after the fatigues of ironing and starching all the morning up in the laundry. On observing the royal equerry, she sprang from her seat, curtsied, and made a rush at the bottle, to hurry it off to the cupboard which stood open behind her: but Bergami, closing the door at once, assumed a stern air, saying, "Put yourself to no trouble, woman, on my account; but answer me the questions I am about to address you."

Mrs. Hubbard was sadly frightened at these words, accompanied by so peremptory and even menacing a manner on the part of Bergami, and sinking back in her seat, she gazed up at him with a stolid amazement that would have been ludicrous enough if he were in any humour to enjoy it.

But it is not our intention to give at length and in detail all that passed between the Baron and Mrs. Hubbard on the present occasion. Suffice it to say, that he opened his business with her by the assurance that if she told him the truth in respect to certain matters that had transpired, he would hold her harmless; but if she acted with duplicity or falsehood, he would punish her most severely. Having already suspected from the very first moment Bergami began speaking, that his visit was in some way connected with recent occurrences, she grew terribly alarmed, and fell upon her knees, declaring that whatever part she took in the affair of the memorable night three weeks back, was through love of the Princess, whose honour she wished to save!

Thereupon Bergami bade her rise—made her resume her seat—and ordered her to tell him all she knew. She fell to crying and sobbing, and saying that if she had watched at her door at different times and seen *him* stealing along the passage at night, it was only because Mrs. Ranger had told her what was going on and had put it into her head thus to play the spy.

It was now Bergami's turn to be astonished: for he knew full well that it was not himself who had been seen creeping stealthily along the passage in the manner described. On questioning and cross-questioning Mrs. Hubbard, he found that she adhered to her story without contradiction or prevarication; and he now began to comprehend that the conspiracy must have had a phase of which he and Jocelyn Loftus had hitherto little dreamt. In plain terms, he saw that somebody must have personated *him*, in order the more effectually to work out the detestable purpose of involving the Princess's reputation in irretrievable ruin.

That he had been so personated by some one, was a suspicion speedily confirmed by several little circumstances which he elicited from Mrs. Hubbard. For instance, Mrs. Ranger had never allowed her to peep forth long enough to satisfy herself that the individual personating him really entered the room of the Princess; and moreover the personator was invariably dressed in a frock-coat—never in an evening costume—although it was at night time when the said personator was wont to appear. Mrs. Hubbard likewise mentioned that, now she came to think seriously upon the matter, she had more than once fancied at the time that the person whom she took for Baron Bergami always looked shorter than he really was.

But now there was another phase in the tremendous conspiracy which Mrs. Hubbard revealed to the Baron; and this was that on two occasions when she had been induced by Mrs. Ranger to peep forth from her room, she had seen the Princess herself introducing a paramour along the passage! Astonishment for a minute prevented Bergami from uttering a word: but when he was enabled to question her, he found that she consistently and positively pledged herself to having seen her Royal Highness on two consecutive occasions approaching up the passage, in company each time with a male stranger. When asked how she knew it was the Princess, Mrs. Hubbard replied that it was because she wore the satin cloak bordered with ermine and the green silk hood which she was wont to put on of an evening, and which it was impossible to mistake.

The Baron could scarcely restrain his indignation on hearing these details, which gave him so much more profound an insight into the ramifications of the fearful conspiracy. That he and the Princess had alike been *personated* on different occasions was beyond all question: because not for an instant did he believe that her Royal Highness had been guilty of the thing imputed to her. Indeed, so furious was the rage which boiled up in the breast of Bergami, that he could scarcely prevent himself from rushing forth and at once surrendering the three sisters, together with Mrs. Ranger, to the authorities of Geneva. But recollect

ing how necessary it was to adopt the cautious and prudential course recommended by Jocelyn, he put a curb upon his passion and restrained his feelings as well as he was able.

He saw plainly enough that Mrs. Hubbard was a dupe and not an accomplice, and that Mrs. Ranger and the Owens had so contrived matters, with the most exquisite refinement of satanic ingenuity, as to make her a witness of the supposed guilt of the Princess! The Baron therefore lost no time in disabusing the woman's mind.

"Mrs. Hubbard," he said, "I came to this apartment under the impression that you were an accomplice in a fearful conspiracy: but I now perceive that you are its dupe. This conspiracy has been concocted for the ruin of your royal mistress. You have never seen *me* in the passage as you state, but some one who has personated me: nor have you ever seen the Princess in the condition which you have described, but some one personating *her!* To such an extent has the fiend-like imaginativeness of these wretches gone! Ah! you may well hold up your hands in amazement: but let me tell you that all is discovered, even to the fact that it was Agatha Owen herself, and not the Princess, who gave birth to a child within these walls—that child, whose corpse you have had in your arms! And now I am reminded," added Bergami, "that those two gentlemen whom you saw at Lausanne—Colonel Malpas and the Earl of Curzon—for such were their names—were the paramours of Emma and Julia Owen; and doubtless *they* were the same two individuals whom you saw introduced to the villa by the wearers of the ermine cloak and silken hood!"

Mrs. Hubbard was astounded at all she thus heard—as well indeed she might be: but she was no longer frightened on account of herself—for Bergami's manner had undergone an entire change towards her from the moment he found she was a dupe and not an accomplice. He spoke kindly and encouragingly, reiterating his assurance that no harm should befall her. He also bade her maintain the profoundest silence relative to this interview which he had with her, until the time came when she would be required to speak out and tell all she knew. Mrs. Hubbard promised most faithfully to comply with these instructions; and the Baron then took his departure from her chamber, more than ever astounded, afflicted, and indignant, at the atrocious measures set on foot to ruin the Princess of Wales.

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We must now return to Mrs. Ranger, who in the meantime had also re-entered the villa.

Proceeding straight to the apartment where she had left the sisters two hours before, she found them still there in no very enviable state of mind.

The moment she made her appearance, they started up—rushed towards her—and with their eager looks, more than with their hurried words, showed the intense anxiety which filled their hearts.

"Tranquillize yourselves, girls—tranquillize yourselves," she said in an encouraging tone. "The evil is tremendous—but the danger may be surmounted."

The young ladies were somewhat soothed by her words: but still the anodyne thus conveyed was incommensurate with the frightful lacerations which poignant terror had inflicted upon their souls. Despite, too, the somewhat sanguine manner in which Mrs. Ranger had just announced that there was a loop-hole of escape from their embarrassments, they were now compelled to pass through another fearful phase of excitement when the old hag circumstantially narrated to them all that had taken place between herself and Maravelli. Heavens! how did the hearts of the three sisters sink within them, and what terrible feelings took possession of their souls, as they heard how Jocelyn Loftus was pursuing the track of his investigations—how he had extorted all the physician's secrets—how he was acquainted with all the adventures of the memorable night at the villa—and how he had the very corpse of the child fished up from the depth of the lake! At one moment so sudden a faintness seized upon Agatha—for Mrs. Ranger was not over nice or delicate in giving the particulars of the narrative as she had heard it from Maravelli—that had not strong restoratives been applied, she would have fallen into a swoon. By means of a powerful cordial, however, she was inspired with that artificial energy which is only enjoyed to the prejudice of health's natural vigour, in the same way that opium and alcohol prey upon the constitution which they either lull into dreamy bliss or raise into ecstacy.

"Now, my dear girls, you know the *worst*," said Mrs. Ranger; "and it is time I should tell you the *best*. I waylaid Bergami as he returned from Maravelli's house. He of course knows all: but it is quite clear that neither he nor Loftus propose to have recourse to harsh measures immediately. Their aim is intelligible enough: they mean to get together all the information they can and clear up every point which is at all mysterious or perplexing, before they make the grand exposure. Now, then, we have breathing time: we have the rest of this day before us—and all to-night——"

"Good heavens! then to-morrow the exposure may come?" exclaimed the sisters, clasping their hands in despair. "Oh! let us fly—let us fly——"

"Foolish girls! how can you fly?" demanded Mrs. Ranger. "Without time to get passports made out, we should be arrested as suspicious fugitives——No, no—flight is impossible—we must remain and dare it all!"

"But we have but a few hours before us!" exclaimed Julia, shuddering.

"And in those few hours an immensity may be done," rejoined Mrs. Ranger. "Bergami desires to see you all three at the jetty at five o'clock. You must go. It is for the purpose of making *another* appointment for you elsewhere—and this *other* appointment is with Loftus, which you must also keep ——"

"What! see Loftus, after all he knows?" cried Agatha in dismay. "Is he not aware that I have been delivered of a child?—is not the very corpse of that child in his possession?"

"Oh! it becomes you admirably to play the shame-faced and the prude," cried Mrs. Ranger scornfully,—"you who did all you could to win him to your arms in Paris—displaying all your beauties with the luxuriousness of a wanton——"

"Enough, enough!" said Agatha, biting her lips

at the taunt. "If you think it necessary that we shall see Loftus, we will do so."

"Yes—necessary indeed!" replied Mrs. Ranger: then in a deeper tone she added, "It is necessary, because it may save the necessity for three murders!"

"What mean you?" demanded Emma in horror and dismay, as it instantaneously struck her that the dreadful old woman was now alluding to Bergami as well as to others.

"I mean," rejoined Mrs. Ranger, speaking with the firmness of a cold and implacable decision, "that there are *three* enemies whom we have now to fear! This morning there were *two*—Loftus and Lady Prescott: but within the last few hours, Bergami has been added. Well then, if Loftus mean to propose some terms and conditions that will avoid the necessity of exposure—and if an avenue of safety be open to us all—then will it be unnecessary to do the work of death. But if, on the other hand, the result of your interviews with Bergami and Loftus, respectively, should prove that exposure *must* ensue—that we are *not* to be spared—and that punishment *is* intended us—then must Loftus, Lady Prescott, and Bergami all three die this night!"

The girls shuddered from head to foot: but Emma's shuddering, as Mrs. Ranger mentioned the name of Bergami, was even more agonising and convulsive than that of her sisters. But she said nothing—only fell immediately into a profound reverie.

"Methought," said Agatha, in the low hushed tone of terror, to Mrs. Ranger, "that you had already agreed with Dr. Maravelli——"

"Yes—that Loftus and Lady Prescott are to die," returned the woman: "but I did not *then* foresee that Jocelyn would desire to have an interview with you. His doing so looks conciliatory—or rather, I should say, as if he meant to be merciful. In this case his death will answer no good purpose—will be unnecessary. Therefore, after the interview with him to-night, wherever it may take place, it will be for *you*, Agatha, to judge whether it is safe to let him live—or whether our interests require that he should die. If he is to live, then must you find the opportunity of breathing the word to Maravelli: but if he is to die, then nothing need be said, and the doctor will do his work!"

"You argue as if you expected that the interview between us and Loftus," said Agatha, "is sure to take place at Maravelli's house?"

"I believe so, from what Bergami said. However, he will let you know all about it presently; and we shall be perhaps better able to decide how to act. But mind," continued Mrs. Ranger emphatically, "that whatever our purpose be, our resolution must be bold and inflexible: whatever we determine upon, must be carried out to the very letter! Consider how much depends on all this. Is it not better to dare everything, sooner than suffer ourselves to be dragged away to a felon's gaol? I am half inclined to believe," she added in a very low whisper to Agatha—a whisper which she alone heard, "that Emma has become spooney with respect to Bergami. Look into what a mood of abstraction she has fallen—and Julia too, gazing listlessly upon her——"

"Yes," whispered Agatha; "Emma *is* indeed in love with Bergami—and I think that the feeling already amounts to an infatuation."

"Ah! if Bergami were a man to be tempted," said Mrs. Ranger, thoughtfully, "he might be won over by Emma's seductiveness to serve our purposes. We might make use of him to persuade Jocelyn Loftus to pardon us—aye, and even to shield us from any evil consequences——"

"Yes," interrupted Agatha, catching hopefully at the idea—or rather we should say desperately: "why should not Bergami be won to Emma's arms? Is he not a mortal of flesh and blood—and is it at all likely he will prove another Jocelyn Loftus? No, no: by those dark expressive eyes—by his whole aspect—Bergami is not a saint like Jocelyn!"

"Then I tell you what must be done," said Mrs. Ranger, still speaking aside with Agatha. "You shall all three keep the appointment with Bergami at five o'clock—and when you have heard what he has to say, do you and Julia leave Emma with him on some pretence. Of course you can tell Emma presently that you are going to do so. She will doubtless be well pleased; and your ingenuity, Agatha, will not fail to devise some feasible excuse for so leaving them together."

Agatha nodded assent to the suggestions which Mrs. Ranger so artfully threw out; and as the hour to keep the appointment was now approaching, the three young ladies proceeded to attire themselves in their walking apparel.

CHAPTER CLIX.

THE SYREN'S WILES.

PUNCTUALLY at five o'clock Baron Bergami repaired to the trysting-place on the shore of Lake Leman; and there, close by the jetty, did he find the three sisters waiting for him. They were pale, and had evidently been most painfully excited: indeed, as he approached them, their agitation was visible enough, notwithstanding their efforts to look composed and even assume an air of confidence.

Bergami had no pity for them. He felt shocked at the thought that three such lovely creatures so eminently endowed by nature, should possess hearts so black; and that such fair exteriors should serve as a veil to hide so much profligacy and dissoluteness. Alas! what charming skins do some snakes wear!—what dazzling hues appear upon the sinuous forms of those serpents whose touch is death!

Yes—Bergami felt shocked as he thought of the depravity of these three young women whom nature had made so beautiful: and he even experienced the suffocating sense of a sudden indignation as the incidents of the ermine cloak and the personation of himself rushed with vivid effect to his memory. But subduing any outward expression of his emotions, and shrouding whatsoever he felt beneath a calmly dignified demeanour, he made the usual salutation of courtesy as he approached.

His manner, though so reserved and distant—almost to sternness—nevertheless somewhat revived the spirits of the three sisters; for they had almost expected that he would accost them with immediate upbraidings and reproaches. Emma, especially, regained much of her lost fortitude and assurance; and flinging a second glance, from beneath the rich

dark fringe of her eye-lids, on the calm, pensive, and mournful features of the Baron, she thought to herself, "Oh! if I could but conquer him with the artillery of my fascinations—if I could but enmesh him in the web of my seductive snares—we should be saved, we should be saved!"

And as this thought sent a thrill of hope through her entire frame—rousing at the same time some of that natural passion which had sunk sluggish and almost dead under the weight of recent horror—a tint of the fled carnation came back to her cheeks. Bergami noticed this—noticed also the quick and sidelong glance which she had flung upon him—and felt some suspicion of the truth arising in his mind. For Jocelyn had given him some insight into the Circean blandishments and Syren wiles which the sisters had practised towards himself in Paris: and thus he was not altogether unprepared for any such display of feminine seductiveness that might be aimed at his own heart.

"Young ladies," he said, without appearing to notice what we have just described, "it is necessary that I should have a few minutes' conversation with you upon a painful—most painful subject. I did not choose to convey to you through Mrs. Ranger all that I wished to say; because I was fearful that she might not deliver my message aright—or that if she did, she might attempt to dissuade you from acting in accordance therewith. Hence my object in seeking this interview; and we who have so often roamed along the banks of Lake Leman as friends, while attending upon our royal mistress, must now tread in the same steps with far different feelings. Lest we should be observed we will not remain standing in this particular spot: we will walk a little way along the shore—and I beg you will give me your earnest attention."

The party accordingly turned away from the jetty, and began following the course of the lake's margin. Agatha and Julia walked on Bergami's right hand, and Emma on his left: but we need hardly state that he did not offer them his arm. The sisters were however still more cheered by his words than they had previously been by his looks: for what he had said seemed uttered in sorrow rather than in anger, and in a tone of deep lament rather than of harsh upbraiding.

"You are aware," he continued, "that I have seen Mr. Loftus? Mrs. Ranger has no doubt told you so; and from his lips have I heard many, many painful things. Indeed, if all good feeling be not extinguished within you—and at your age I can scarcely believe it possible that you are so thoroughly inured to crime as to be able to contemplate its paths backward without remorse, and forward without fear——"

"No, no—we are not so bad as all that!" cried Emma, suddenly catching him by the arm, while her bosom appeared to be wrung with convulsive sobs.

"God grant that what you say may be true!" exclaimed Bergami: "but you must all three feel, if you feel anything at all, that an immense atonement is required for the misdeed whereof you have been guilty. That you could not have naturally become so wicked—so very very wicked—is certain, and that therefore you have been rendered so by a shocking course of training, is equally positive. Indeed, that such was the case I have heard from Mr. Loftus, who, as you are well aware, learnt all particulars concerning you from your sister Mary in England. For these reasons, therefore—I mean, viewing you as the instruments that a hideous system of training rendered pliant and ductile with a sort of plastic art to the purposes of the arch-fiends who are in England—both Mr. Loftus and myself are inclined to hold that there is some little extenuation for you. At all events, this is the merciful and compassionate view which Mr. Loftus has thought fit to take of the whole tenour of your conduct; and I do not wish to differ from him. Therefore was it that I commenced by speaking of atonement——"

"Ah! show us what atonement we could make," said Emma, the words coming apparently clothed in a gush of fervid feelings from the heart, "and you know not how cheerfully we will follow your commands!"

"Yes—and gratefully too," said Agatha, with a voice into which she likewise threw as much feeling as possible.

"If we could only live the last few months over again," added Julia, "all this would not happen!"

"Most sincerely do I hope," continued Bergami, "that these averments of contrition come from the depths of your hearts! But it is not to me that you should say all this: it is not to me that you are to promise atonement. It is to Mr. Loftus—that young man who is as generous as you have represented him to be base—who is as noble-hearted as you have depicted him to be depraved—who is as high-principled as you have painted him profligate and dissolute,—it is to him, I say, that you must repeat all you are now saying to me! Indeed, Mrs. Ranger has no doubt informed you that Mr. Loftus requires an interview with you this night. Do you feel disposed to visit him at Dr. Maravelli's house——"

"Maravelli's?" ejaculated Agatha, in a voice of unfeigned horror, as she thought of the dead child—her child—which was there, beneath that roof!

"Yes—at Dr. Maravelli's," responded Bergami: "and not only at his house, but likewise at the solemn hour of midnight! All three of you must be there—not one must remain away upon any pretence. Do you understand me?—and do you agree?"

"Oh! yes—we accept everything that falls from your lips, as if from the arbiter of our destiny!" exclaimed Emma, still in that fervid tone of feeling which she knew so well how to assume. "For my part, I swear to be there!"

"And I also," said Julia, "if it will ensure us mercy and forbearance at the hands of Mr. Loftus and yourself."

"Then assuredly I cannot hesitate to declare in the affirmative likewise," added Agatha, in a faint voice.

"It is understood then," said Bergami; "and I warn you against any hesitation or any neglect in fulfilling the pledge which you have all three given. Ye will go alone through the silence of the night—there are no dangers to apprehend—and ye doubtless know the way thither. Do not attempt to fly from Geneva: I warn you that such an endeavour will prove ineffectual—for I would have you pursued ignominiously—brought back—and mercilessly handed over to punishment!"

"I can assure you—Oh! I can assure you most positively," said Emma, again catching his arm as if by an involuntary impulse, and looking up into his face with an expression of frightened, deprecating, piteous entreaty,—"that we will obey you to the very letter! Do not—do not mistrust us altogether. Everything that we can do now by way of atonement for the past, shall be done!"

"Yes, Emma," exclaimed Agatha: "plead our cause with Baron Bergami! I am at a loss for words to express all I feel: but you have greater fortitude than I. Come, Julia, let us leave Emma as our advocate!"

Thus speaking, the eldest sister turned abruptly away, accompanied by Julia; and speeding along the shore, without once looking back, they thus retraced their steps towards the jetty.

So suddenly was this manœuvre accomplished, that Bergami, though naturally cool and self-possessed, was taken completely aback, and he could not utter a word: but almost instantaneously penetrating the stratagem, he allowed it to take its course—thus appearing to fall a dupe to the pretence adopted for the purpose of leaving Emma alone in his company.

"Now, what have you to say to me?" he at length asked, turning his looks upon Emma.

"Oh! what *can* I say to you?" she exclaimed, joining her hands together and gazing up into his countenance with every appearance of the most impassioned appeal. "I would beseech you—I would implore you to have mercy upon myself and my two sisters! But, Ah! I feel faint—the excitement I have endured has been too much——permit me to lean upon your arm——only for a few moments, till we reach that knot of trees——There!——Thanks, thanks, Baron Bergami—I see that after all you do not so utterly loathe, hate, and despise me——Oh! unfortunate being that I am, to be compelled to give utterance to such words as these!"

And she sank, with every appearance of exhaustion, at the foot of a group of trees, to which Bergami had hurried her as she clung to his arm, and the shade of which now concealed them both from the observation of any one who might be walking within eye-shot of the place.

"Pray sit down by my side—humour me thus far—grant me this little favour," murmured Emma, seeming as if she were about to faint: "for I wish to speak to you seriously—most seriously—and I must rest here for a few minutes."

Bergami made no hesitation in yielding to her request; and this ready complaisance on his part emboldened the artful young woman to an extent that she flattered herself the influence of her spells was beginning to work.

"Oh! if it were not for this delicious breeze which comes from the lake, I should faint," she said, as Bergami seated himself on the bank at a distance of perhaps three feet from where she was half reclining. "Is not this breeze beautiful?"—and as if with quite a mechanical and unconscious movement, she threw back her scarf and opened the front of her dress in such a manner as to display her bosom.

"Yes," said the Baron, not appearing to notice the manœuvre, but keeping his eyes bent downward: "it is indeed a beauteous evening—and distressing is it to think that while nature is so serene around, the human heart cannot imbibe a kindred inspiration from this soft tranquillity. The glory of the descending sun is upon the waters: its beams appear to penetrate, like shafts of living light, down into the very depths of that sleeping sea! How is it that the lustre of that same heavenly orb cannot fathom the profundities of the human soul?"

"Oh! how delicious is it to hear you speak thus," said Emma, in accents that were soft and musically tremulous. "You do not now seem to be angry with me—you do not now appear as if rancorous feelings were agitating within you——Ah! is it possible that you have comprehended that emotion which for some time past I have experienced towards you? If such be indeed the case, then shall I conceive myself blessed with a happiness which on account of my misdeeds is so utterly undeserved! Ah! you do not chide me—you do not bid me hold my peace? Then indeed is there hope that I am not altogether indifferent to you. Oh! an idea suddenly strikes me," she cried, with no affectation of a suddenly enhancing excitement: for the thought *did* that moment flash to her brain. "The mercy you are disposed to show us is dictated by a generous pity—dare I say a tender compassion for *me?*"

She paused for a reply: but Bergami, instead of giving one, bowed his face upon his hands and appeared to plunge into deep thought.

"Oh! I have guessed the truth," exclaimed Emma, her tones becoming now almost exultant as she felt within herself the assurance that the magic of her charms was working its effect upon the Prussian officer. "Now, then, shall I confess frankly and candidly that I love you! Yes, noble Bergami—from the first moment I set eyes upon you, have I been smitten by your handsome person—your engaging manners—your fascinating discourse; and latterly I have not been able to conceal from you this love of mine, but have sought on many occasions to convey an intimation of its existence to your comprehension. Think you it was by mere accident that I have been so frequently placed next to you at the dinner-table—or that when walking abroad, I have found myself by your side——Ah! no: it was all intentional on my part—those little ways, and means, and artifices by which a woman makes known her love!"

"And if I were to give you the assurance of love in return," asked Bergami, slowly raising his head and turning his eyes full upon the young lady's countenance, which was now beaming with mingled hope, passion, and triumph,—"if I were to confess to you that I have not been indifferent to your charms—that I have seen and understood your little wiles—and that if I have been slow to respond to them, it is because I was fearful lest my vanity should have led me to construe into love the merest tokens of friendship,—if I were to tell you all this, Emma, would you give me any proof of love in return? would you convince me that yours is indeed a sincere, a genuine affection, and not a passing phantasy and evanescent whim?"

"O heavens! is it true—is it possible—that I hear you talking thus?" cried Emma, hurried away by the raptures of exultation and amorous passion which were now utterly past control: and seizing Bergami's hand, she pressed it first to her lips and then to her heaving bosom.

"Love must have no dalliance until its sincerity has been proved," said Bergami, gently withdrawing his hand, but gazing upon Emma with every appearance of a tenderness that no longer sought to conceal itself.

"Speak, speak—what mean you?" she cried, the fever-heat of enthusiastic joy thrilling through her entire form.

"I said ere now that I required a proof of your love. Oh! give it to me," he added, with accents that suddenly became full of entreaty, as if he himself were inspired with some of the passion that made Emma's blood course like lightning in its crimson channels.

"But what proof do you require?" she asked, confident that her charms had altogether subdued him, and that he had become fettered as a slave within the magic circle of her blandishments.

"What proof?" he said, as if pausing to consider; "what proof? I scarcely know what to ask for—unless it be your entire confidence with regard to the sad tortuous course you have been pursuing. Yes—tell me everything, Emma!" he continued, trembling as if with a strong excitement: "prove that you are worthy of my love—that you are sorry for the past—and that you will do all you can by your good conduct to make reparation in future! Convince me, I say, that you are worthy of the love which I have to give you—and the confession of that love shall be made!"

"This is happiness unspeakable—ineffable!" murmured Emma, really feeling what she said: for as the reader is already aware, she had for some time past conceived a strong fancy for Bergami. "Ask me what you choose, and I will reply faithfully and truly!"

"Then will you secure my most devoted love," replied Bergami, gazing upon her with looks that seemed full of passion: but as she again attempted to seize his hand, he snatched it away, crying,

"No, no—not until you have given me proofs the most convincing that you love me! Then—*then*—it is not my hand that you shall take—but it is to my arms you shall come——"

And he stopped short, gasping as with excess of pleasure at the bare idea of joys which he was conjuring up to his imagination.

"Ah! ask me some question and you will see whether I am prompt to reply!" said Emma, whose head was turning and whose senses were becoming bewildered in the tumult of blissful emotions which her easy triumph over Bergami had naturally excited, and which were all the more extravagant—all the more thrilling and intoxicating—inasmuch as they had succeeded an interval of such blank despair and cruel terror.

"Well then," said Bergami, speaking quickly as if putting at random the first thing that entered his head,—"tell me, dear Emma—tell me—which of you three sisters it is who, not content with masquerading on one or two occasions in male costume, must actually have imitated so closely the very garb that I sometimes wear as to be taken for me?"

"Oh! if I tell you—if I tell you," exclaimed Emma, now elevated to the highest degree of excitement, as if she felt she was touching on the very brink of that paradise which contained the consummation of her desires and would be the reward as well as the proof of her triumph,—"if I tell you everything which regards that subject, shall I the next moment be enfolded in your embrace?"

"Yes, yes," answered Bergami: "you shall—you shall!"

"Then it was I who have worn a costume resembling your's!" she answered, in the delirium that filled her brain. "It was *I* who personated *you*, having secretly procured a dress the counterpart of your own. Yes—and likewise whiskers and moustache——Oh! a beautiful moustache," she cried, almost with childest delight, in the exultation that filled her soul and was thus hurrying her so quickly along in the giddy whirl of her thoughts. "In every respect did I assume your external appearance—coat—boots——And all that costume, so neat, so perfect, so elegant, I have it still—it is in my own room—and one of these days, when you have time and choose to humour me, I will put it on and you will tell me how I look——"

"Oh, Emma, Emma! you are intoxicating my brain—you are making me drunk with wicked thoughts!" murmured the royal equerry, as he drew closer towards the syren. "Come into my arms!"

And the next moment Emma—the wanton, glowing, impassioned Emma—was palpitating upon his breast, with her arms thrown round his neck and her lips pressed to his cheek. But scarcely had this incident of the scene endured for a moment—scarcely indeed had she thus precipitated herself into his embrace—when appearing to be suddenly alarmed, he said, "We shall be observed—we shall be observed——Good heavens! what will then be thought? what will be said of us?"—and disengaging himself from her clasp, he started to his feet.

"Oh! you are mine—you are mine!" she exclaimed, in a voice full of rapture: "and I am happy—I am happy," she repeated, her tone swelling to a pitch of thrilling exultation. "But when shall we meet again——Ah! we shall meet in the presence of others: but I mean, when shall we meet *alone?*"

"Listen, Emma," said Bergami, taking her hand and pressing it with every appearance of enthusiastic warmth: "I long to see you in that dress of which you have spoken—that costume wherewith you imitate me. Will you then put it on to-night and come to my chamber——"

"To-night!" echoed Emma, in rapturous joy. "Yes—but that appointment at Maravelli's house, with Jocelyn Lofius——"

"*Must* be kept," answered Bergami, "because I dare not appear in any way to depart one tittle from the arrangements entered into between him and me; and if you were not to go, you would have to allege as an excuse some new understanding with me. This would be to betray what has now taken place—to betray my weakness, in a word—to prove that I had succumbed to the fascination of your charms. And this must not be! Not even to your sisters must you state what has occurred! If you do—if to a living soul you breathe a syllable of this love of our's—I will then stifle it—I will renounce it—I will tear your image from my heart——yes, and all this love of mine, this frantic passion with which you have inspired me, shall turn into the deadliest hate! Do you understand me?—and will you pledge yourself sacredly and solemnly——"

"I do, I do," answered Emma, trembling all over with the fever of joyous excitement: for this seemed to be a triumph so wondrous, so complete, so crowning on her part, that while it promised to minister unto all her devouring desires, it was likewise most eminently flattering to her vanity. "I swear that I will not mention to a soul—no, not to a soul—one syllable of what has now taken place between us! I will keep the appointment too at Maravelli's house, in company with my sisters——And afterwards," she said, with a look full of wanton wickedness and sensuous mischief—"afterwards——"

"Yes—afterwards—no matter at what hour you may come back to the villa from that appointment," said Bergami, "you will apparel yourself in the costume of which you have spoken, and you will come stealthily to my chamber?"

"Yes—Oh! yes—I will not fail you!" she murmured, her heart already panting with voluptuous longings, as with eyes brimful of passion she surveyed the handsome Bergami from head to foot—devouring him as it were with her luxurious looks.

"And now return to your sisters," he said, seizing her hand and again pressing it with cordial warmth. "But remember," he added, fixing upon her an earnest, warning gaze, "if you betray me, then farewell love—farewell the safety which I may guarantee to your sisters and yourself—farewell everything, save the implacable vengeance which I will wreak upon you!"

Having thus spoken, the royal equerry hurried away towards the villa, avoiding altogether the border of the lake as he thus retraced his steps homeward.

Some minutes elapsed before Emma could in any way succeed in calming the flutterings of her heart or reason herself into tranquillity. She was

now entirely absorbed in this new passion which had suddenly blazed up in her heart, being so unexpectedly and copiously fed by the burning fuel which Bergami's conduct had imparted to it. Indeed, so complete was the influence which that man had in so short a time succeeded in gaining over her, that she was resolved, as far as she was able, to follow his injunctions in respect to keeping their amour secret. That is to say, she decided upon telling her sisters as little on the subject as possible, lest by any chance an unfortunate look, or a word too full of meaning on their part, should prove to Bergami that she had betrayed him and thus alienate him from her for ever. Having settled this determination in her mind, and having composed her looks and her thoughts as well as she was able, she issued forth from the shady bower formed by the group of trees, and retraced her way along the bank of Lake Leman towards the jetty, in order to rejoin her sisters.

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But in the meantime what had happened to Agatha and Julia? For while Emma was engaged with Bergami in the manner just described, her two sisters were experiencing an adventure which, although appearing at the moment to be but of trivial importance in comparison with the other exciting circumstances that surrounded them, was nevertheless destined to prove most grave and serious in its results.

On parting so abruptly from Emma and Bergami, Agatha and Julia sped along the shore of the lake in the direction of the jetty whence they had ere now started.

"Think you that Emma will succeed with the equerry?" asked Julia. "Oh! if he were to yield to her seductiveness—her wiles—her fascinations——"

"It would indeed be most important for us," replied Agatha. "For to speak candidly——although I feel not so truly wretched now as I did a few hours back when this storm of dangers exploded above our heads—yet still my heart is filled with misgivings."

"And naturally so," said Julia. "This appointment with Loftus at Maravelli's house, where the dead child lies——"

"Oh! do not talk of it," interrupted Agatha, a strong tremor shooting through her entire form as she and her sister paced rapidly along the margin of the lake, on whose sleeping waters the slanting sunbeams still poured the mellowed glow of their effulgence.

Then there was a long silence, which remained unbroken until the sisters came within a few yards of the jetty; when, raising their eyes from the ground on which they had been bent in meditative mood, they suddenly observed a gentleman seated on a beam which had become detached from the mass of piles and intricacy of wood-work forming the huge pier. At the very same moment that Agatha and Julia observed this gentleman, another gentleman appeared round the piles forming the commencement of the jetty; and as these two gentlemen thus met, evidently unexpectedly, ejaculations of surprise burst from their lips.

"Ah! my lord?" exclaimed the one who had just made his appearance upon the scene.

"What! *you* here again, Colonel Malpas?" cried the other sternly, as he sprang up from his seat on the beam.

But simultaneously did a cry of amazement fall from the lips of Julia as she at once recognized the Earl of Curzon in this latter individual.

"Ah!" cried the nobleman, whose attention was now all in a moment attracted to Julia: "is it indeed you, my charmer—my beauty?"

"Then the other must be Emma!" exclaimed Malpas, also springing forward along with the Earl towards the ladies: but on catching sight of Agatha's countenance he stopped short in sudden disappointment, stammering, "No—it is not—I beg a thousand pardons——"

"This is my elder sister, Miss Owen," said Julia, at once assuming a dignified and even haughty look. "Agatha," she continued, turning to her sister, "this is the Earl of Curzon of whom I have spoken to you on former occasions."

"And you have already learnt," said the Colonel, again advancing, "by the expression which fell from Lord Curzon's lips that *my* name is Malpas. Doubtless your sister Miss Emma has mentioned my name to you; since it appears that you," he added, fixing his eyes upon Julia, "have spoken of the Earl to your sister here."

"And it would likewise seem then," Julia at once observed, "that the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas have spoken to each other relative to us—else would they be more discreet in what they let fall from their lips on the present occasion."

"Dear Julia," said the Earl, "let us have no angry words, I implore you! I have come all the way from England to see you again."

"And I also to see your sister Emma again," added Malpas. "Ah! where is she?"

"But why this haughtiness of air—this reserved manner—this repelling look?" exclaimed Curzon, in a tone of entreaty to Julia.

While the preceding conversation was taking place, both Agatha and Julia had maintained that air of calm dignity which, as well as any other men, they knew so well how to put on to suit the particular occasion. The elder sister now saw Curzon and Malpas for the first time; and she certainly could not wonder that her sisters had accepted them as lovers—for, as the reader is aware, they were both good-looking, tall, and well made. She however affected to regard them without interest, but with a certain loftiness of demeanour, as if she identified herself with the displeasure which Julia chose to demonstrate.

"I can say for myself, Lord Curzon," observed the latter young lady, in reply to the passionate exclamations which had been addressed to her,—"and I think I can also answer for my sister Emma in her absence, that the plot you and Colonel Malpas so unaccountably but so shamefully set on foot to carry us off to Lausanne, but which so signally failed,—must be considered as having raised up an insurmountable barrier between us in future. I therefore wish you good evening. Agatha, come, dear."

"One word, Julia!" ejaculated Curzon, seizing her by the hand and holding it fast despite her efforts to withdraw it. "We cannot part thus! I beseech you to give me an opportunity to explain myself."

"And I, Miss Owen," said Malpas, addressing

himself to Agatha, "beseech you to intercede in my behalf with your sister Emma — since it is evident that you have no secrets from each other."

"Unhand me, Lord Curzon!" said Julia—but her efforts to extricate her hand from his grasp had become feebler and feebler: indeed, with every appearance of vanishing fortitude and dissolving coldness she said, "Do let me go—'tis useless to detain me."

"But will you not give me an opportunity of explaining myself?" persisted Curzon. "After all that has taken place between us, I beg and implore you——"

"I will do nothing—nothing," returned Julia, though with less decision in her voice than before, "unless by Emma's consent. We have told each other everything—we have no secrets—and we must act in concert."

"Yes," observed Agatha, in reply to the solicitations which Malpas continued to press upon her to the effect that she would speak on his behalf to Emma: "I can say nothing more than that my sister must act for herself."

"Then listen," exclaimed Curzon, an idea suddenly striking him—and still he retained Julia's hand in his own. "Will you forward me your decision in writing?—will you think over it? But I implore you not to send me back to England without having had an opportunity of making my peace with you, even if everything should be at an end between us."

"Where will a note reach you?" asked Julia, scarcely knowing what she said: for the natural sentimentalism of her disposition was triumphing over her endeavour to appear distant and reserved; and had it not been for the presence of Agatha, to whom she had boasted in the morning of the way she should treat Curzon if ever they met again, she would at once have precipitated herself into his arms.

"I am staying at the *Hotel Royal*—and this time under my own name," he said. "Will you send me a line—only a single line—to that address? and whatever appointment you may give—for I know that you cannot be cruel enough to refuse my request—I will keep."

"Well, well," said Julia, faintly; "I will think of it. Perhaps you shall hear from me:"—and now she withdrew her hand, but not before Curzon had pressed it to his lips.

"Then, if Emma will see you, Colonel Malpas," said Agatha, anxious to put an end to the present scene, "she also shall write to you. What is *your* address?"

"By a coincidence," answered the Colonel, "I also have taken up my abode at the *Hotel Royal*. I only arrived within this hour at Geneva, and at once strolled down hither in the hope, and almost with the presentiment——"

"Well, but what name do *you* bear at the *Hotel Royal?*" asked Agatha, somewhat impatiently.

"My own name—that of Malpas," was the reply. "But pray do your best for me with your charming sister Emma."

"We shall see," rejoined Agatha. "Good evening, Colonel Malpas—good evening, my lord:"—and taking Julia's hand, she turned abruptly away from the nobleman and the colonel.

But as Julia accompanied her, she threw a quick and scarcely perceptible glance at Curzon over her shoulder—a glance which nevertheless conveyed hope and promise.

The two girls passed quickly away from the vicinage of the jetty, once more proceeding along the bank in the direction which they had ere now pursued with Bergami and their sister. When near the clump of trees they encountered Emma, who was coming to meet them; and all three hastened by the shortest cut back to the villa.

Meantime the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas stood gazing for upwards of a minute on the retreating forms of Agatha and Julia until they were at some considerable distance; and then averting their eyes, they threw their looks upon each other, It was evident that for the moment Curzon knew not exactly how to treat Malpas, and that the Colonel on the other hand was equally uncertain on what ground to consider himself standing with regard to the Earl,—the scene at Lausanne being naturally uppermost in the mind of each—that scene in which they had mutually forced the revelation of secrets at the pistol's muzzle.

"So we meet again," said Curzon, at length breaking silence: then bursting out into a laugh that was partly real and partly forced, he cried, "Well, upon my word there is something uncommonly ludicrous in all this!"

"And awkward too," said Malpas, also laughing: for he would much sooner be on good than on bad terms with the Earl.

"I suppose that Venetia has sent you again?" said Curzon, inquiringly.

"Yes," answered Malpas. "And she has sent you too, doubtless?"

"I do not deny it. I will even admit it is on the same errand too as before—but this time with far more positive instructions."

"The same with me," rejoined Malpas. "I am to leave no stone unturned to break up the conspiracy. I am even to tell Emma that I know all about it, and threaten her with exposure unless she herself voluntarily withdraws from it."

"Just what I am to say to Julia," remarked Curzon. "And the reward which Venetia has promised you?"

"A thousand a-year," replied Malpas. "She gave me five thousand when in London; and I expect to find three or four thousand more when I call at the banker's in this city to-morrow. I came too late to-day. Those thousands are a reward for past services——But what have you had? and what more do you expect?"

"I also have had a few thousands," replied Curzon; "and more than that, I am to have a Marquisate and a pension. Venetia has promised it to me——But I see that we must compare notes again, and that we have a great deal to talk about. Come, since we are both staying at the same hotel, let us return thither in each other's company; and if you like, we will dine together and talk matters over."

"Be it so," responded Malpas. "What are the odds that we do not each receive a tender billet from our fair ones before many hours have elapsed?"

"I am convinced that we shall," answered Curzon. "That parting glance which Julia gave me has left no room for doubt."

Thus conversing, Lord Curzon and Colonel Malpas strolled away from the vicinage of the pier, in the direction of the city.

CHAPTER CLX.

THE LISTENERS.—THE OLD HARRIDAN.

THE plot of our tale is thickening rapidly; incidents are multiplying, and episodes are growing out of the adventures which we are now chronicling. It therefore requires a clear head on our part to keep these varied and yet ramified occurrences as distinctly defined as possible, each in the special channel in which it is flowing—while the reader must carefully follow us as we advance in the seeming labyrinth, through which we shall however conduct him in a way to render all the objects he may encounter perfectly intelligible and clear.

But ere we return to the three sisters whom we left wending their way back to the villa, we must pause for a little space to inform our readers that the whole scene which we have just described as having taken place on the part of Curzon, Malpas, Agatha, and Julia, was witnessed by two ladies who were concealed behind the piles of the jetty. These two ladies were Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon—for such was really Maravelli's new lodger, who had chosen to call herself *Mrs. Montague.*

When Curzon and Malpas were at a sufficient distance from the pier, Lady Prescott and the Countess issued forth from their hiding-place; and for some minutes they walked along the bank of the lake, side by side, in the deepest silence. But their countenances showed how violent, or rather how intense, were the feelings that agitated their hearts—the passions which swayed their souls. Each was of an olive complexion; but a dead pallor now sat upon their features, and the strangeness of their looks marred even their beauty and gave them at the moment a ghastly—almost a hideous aspect.

"This is a strange—a wonderful coincidence!" said Lady Prescott, at length breaking silence.

"Yes—a coincidence that seems as if it were prepared by Satan!" responded the Countess of Curzon, in a tone full of deep and sinister meaning.

"I understand you," said Lady Prescott, as if her own voice had caught up precisely the same intonation, which was indeed natural enough, as the same furies were gnawing at either heart and their souls were tortured by kindred fires.

"Now," said the Countess of Curzon, after a brief pause, "that man on whose head you have invoked an implacable vengeance is in your power!"

"But that man," rejoined Lady Prescott, "is *your* husband."

"My husband," echoed Editha, with a mocking laugh and a fiendish look: "my mortal enemy, you mean! If you refuse to slay him, I will do the deed myself. Heartless villain—miscreant that he is, he has covered me with disgrace and plunged me into ruin. Oh! with what fiend-like malice did he gloat over my fall and expose me even to the very servants on that dreadful night when everything was discovered! Aye, and that demoniac vengeance which he wreaked upon my faithful, my loving Gertrude——But I have already told you everything, Lady Prescott, and need not recapitulate."

"Then you are decided upon abandoning your husband unto my vengeance?" asked the latter.

"I am," replied Editha, in a deep voice, but the accents of which were full of a frightful and implacable resolution.

"Vengeance for me then!" exclaimed Lady Prescott, in a tone suddenly thrilling with exultation: "and vengeance likewise for *you*, inasmuch as Malpas—that man of whom you have told me so many things—is within your reach!"

"Yes: Malpas—the vile, sneaking, pitiful coward," resumed Editha, with a terrible accentuation on the words,—"he who gave my husband all the information which enabled him to unmask the stratagem carried on through the agency of Lady Lechmere—he who furnished the clue to those arrangements which had been so admirably combined and which without such betrayal would have defied all his penetration,—that Malpas who has worked so much mischief after all the love I once bestowed on him—that villain is at length in my power, and he shall die!"

Having given utterance to these words with a terrible emphasis, Editha remained silent for two or three minutes, during which interval Lady Prescott also held her peace, being absorbed in her own reflections.

"Does it not seem," at length continued the Countess of Curzon, "as if some superior power were guiding us on both alike to the consummation of that vengeance which we had so much longed to wreak, but the accomplishment of which until this last half-hour seemed so distant, even if it were ever possible at all? But as I have already told you, some secret and unaccountable presentiment urged me, when flying from disgrace in England and seeking refuge on the Continent, to visit Geneva. It was not so much on account of the tranquillity of this little republic that I came hither: but impelled by that feeling to which I have just alluded——"

"But," interrupted Lady Prescott, "in recounting your history to me yesterday, did you not mention that during the long absence of your husband from home, you received two letters—one bearing the post-mark of Milan, and the other of Geneva?"

"Yes—it was so," answered Lady Curzon: "and perhaps this circumstance was floating uppermost in my mind, though unconsciously at the time, when I resolved upon coming to Geneva. But far—very far was I from anticipating that I should meet my husband here! Equally little did I expect to encounter this hated Malpas, against whom all my rage is now concentrated! When we came forth to walk this evening and bent our steps towards the jetty——"

"You would not believe, when from a distance I recognized your husband approaching," interrupted Lady Prescott. "But I knew him at once—knew him by his gait—his walk so noble, so dignified, so commanding, and yet so elegant!"

"Heavens! can you thus praise him whom you have doomed to death?" cried Editha, almost savagely.

"True! I was wrong to call up any memory that might possibly serve to weaken me in my purpose. And yet it was not through a transitory failing in my resolve," continued Lady Prescott: "for *that* is stern—inexorable; but it was

the train of thought unwittingly flowing on and giving expression to itself, even as it were against my own will."

"We must show no weakness in the consummation of our design," said Editha.

"Think you not that the scene which has just taken place is but too well calculated to rivet the implacability of my own craving for revenge?" asked Lady Prescott. "When at the moment we first beheld Lord Curzon approaching the jetty, and I dragged you as it were behind the piles so that we might conceal ourselves from his view, it was because I wished to watch his movements. In thus wishing I had a motive—and that motive was to avail myself of any circumstance which might transpire to put the means of vengeance within my reach! And he, not having observed us as we so quickly concealed ourselves under the jetty—he, little suspecting who was so near, addressed himself in words of tenderness, and love, and entreaty to that profligate Julia Owen!"

"But all those allusions which subsequently took place," asked Editha, "between my husband and Malpas relative to Lady Sackville—what could they mean?"

"Oh! let us not trouble ourselves," exclaimed Lady Prescott, "about the affairs of others! We have our own course to pursue."

"Yes—you are right," said Editha. "Let us concentrate all our thoughts upon this vengeance which we are about to wreak!"

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Return we now to the three sisters.

When Emma rejoined Agatha and Julia in the manner already described, she had not so fully composed her countenance as to subdue altogether the flush of pleasurable excitement which the scene with Bergami had conjured up.

"Have you ensnared him?—have you touched his heart?" inquired Julia, anxiously.

"Yes—I think that I have made some little impression upon him," responded Emma. "I evidently moved him by my tears and the little demonstrations of love that I was enabled to make: but I dared not go too far. At all events," she added, suddenly recollecting the frightful threat which Mrs. Ranger had uttered ere now, that if circumstances required the deed, Bergami must die as well as Loftus and Lady Prescott,—"at all events, I think that to-morrow, if I have another opportunity, I shall gain a victory. Indeed, I am sure of it! There is no need to fear Bergami: he will rather take our part than otherwise—and altogether I am full of hope that we shall yet come forth scatheless from the terrible ordeal of dangers through which we are passing."

"Oh! what a blessing it will be to hail peace, contentment, and tranquillity once more!" said Agatha, with the most genuine sincerity.

"And I echo the observation," added Julia. "Let us once get clear out of this present embarrassment, and no more conspiracies for me—no more intrigues save those of gallantry and love! And this reminds me to tell your Emma of what has just taken place down at the jetty yonder."

She then described the scene which had occurred with the Earl and with Malpas. Emma was much astonished to hear of the return of those two individuals; and when her sister had concluded her tale, she said, "It was all very well to promise to write to them in order to get rid of their importunity: but I hope, Julia, that you do not intend any such thing. Remember what you said this morning—that you would never forgive Curzon——"

"Nor will I," interrupted Julia, somewhat petulantly, though at the bottom of her heart there lurked the secret resolve that should existing circumstances turn out favourably in the long run, she would renew her amour with the handsome Earl despite her two sisters' ridicule or scorn.

They now re-entered the villa; and it being past seven o'clock, they had only just time to hasten to their respective rooms and make the necessary change in their toilette for dinner. This repast in the Princess's household was usually served up at half-past seven: but on the evening of which we are writing it was delayed somewhat, and therefore the sisters were not late after all. The Princess had been seized with indisposition—probably arising from the excitement which she had experienced during the day; and she kept her own room instead of descending to the dinner-table. Bergami was likewise absent, he having gone into the city with the alleged excuse of being invited to dine with a friend, but in reality to see Jocelyn Loftus. There were consequently only the six ladies-in-waiting, the young lady who acted as "reader" to the Princess, and Mrs. Ranger, at the dinner-table on the present occasion. The meal was not therefore prolonged: and soon after the dessert Mrs. Ranger sought an opportunity of taking Agatha aside in order to ascertain what had passed at the interview with Bergami.

Proceeding to another room, the old harridan and the young lady shut themselves in; and the latter repeated all that Bergami had said in her hearing. She then explained what Emma had said relative to her hopes of success in ensnaring the royal equerry within the influence of her charms.

"And this appointment with Loftus is for twelve to-night?" said Mrs. Ranger, who had listened with the profoundest attention and interest to all that had just fallen from Agatha's lips.

"For twelve to-night," responded the young lady, shuddering visibly.

"But Bergami's manner was kind?" continued Mrs. Ranger, still speaking interrogatively.

"No—not kind, but forbearing," answered Agatha.

"Ah! I do not like it—I do not like it," said Mrs. Ranger; and she shook her head ominously. "But does Emma *really* think that she will succeed in winning the equerry to her arms?"

"She does—she does," replied Agatha. "She is sanguine—so sanguine that she feels convinced Bergami will save us."

"But Bergami cannot save us if Jocelyn Loftus be determined to ruin us," interrupted Mrs. Ranger emphatically. "Ah! if Bergami had succumbed this evening—if Emma had succeeded ere now in bringing him to her feet—if, in a word, he had already received her favours,—*then* would it be different, and he would doubtless raise heaven and earth to save her, and in saving her must have held us harmless also! But it is not so: he has *not* succumbed—and any little advan-

tage which Emma may have gained over his feelings by playing upon his senses, will be lost as sober reflection returns to him. Besides, wherefore has Bergami gone into the city now? Not to dine with a friend! No—it is preposterous: but to see Loftus——"

"Ah! then you really believe," interrupted Agatha, "that we are still as much encompassed by dreadful perils as ever?"

"Do I think so?" ejaculated Mrs. Ranger: "indeed I do! And now prepare yourself, Agatha—prepare yourself, I say," she repeated in a deep voice and with an ominous look, "to hear the resolve—the *last resolve* to which I have come—a resolve which is fixed and whence there shall be no retreat!"

"And that resolve?" asked Agatha shudderingly.

"It is," returned Mrs. Ranger, fixing her eyes with reptile-like glare upon the young lady, "that unless Loftus positively and actually, of his own accord, proclaims his forgiveness of you this night, you must withhold the word from Maravelli's ear that will spare his and Lady Prescott's life! You must let the physician do the work of death according to his promise; and then Bergami must die also!"

"But Emma?" interrupted Agatha, in a thick and scarcely audible voice: "will *she* consent to this? Or will she not, in her vanity—her infatuation—or whatever it may be, insist that Bergami shall live, for her to try her seductive arts upon him?"

"Foolish girl that you are!" said Mrs. Ranger: "can you not understand that Emma must be kept ignorant of this feature of our proceedings?"

"Oh! yes—I understand you now," said Agatha, shuddering again. "Would to God that I also were ignorant——"

"Cease this piping and whining," interrupted Mrs. Ranger sharply. "It is not *your* hand that will do these deeds—nor will suspicion fall upon *us!* Let Maravelli work on the one hand with his subtle poisons: I on the other will go and seek those instruments of crime, Kobolt and his gang, whom this night I will introduce secretly and stealthily into the villa. They shall hide themselves in my room until you return from Maravelli's: then if you tell me that your interview with Loftus has been of a satisfactory character and that you have spoken the word to Maravelli to spare him and Lady Prescott—*then*, I say, may Bergami be spared also, and Kobolt with his comrades may go about their business. But if, on the other hand, on your return from Maravelli's, you tell me that the word has *not* been spoken, but that Loftus and Lady Prescott will die, then must Bergami die also! Kobolt and his gang will do the work; and ere they quit his room, to which I myself will conduct them, they in their experience of such matters shall give it the aspect of having been entered for the sake of plunder——"

"Oh! cease these details," interrupted Agatha. "Do what you will—take any step you consider necessary, no matter how desperate, to save us all from this gulf of ruin which yawns at our feet! But, my God! spare me the details—spare me the details! Would to heaven that the next week—or even the next four-and-twenty hours were over!"

"Now do not give way to this puling language," said Mrs. Ranger harshly. "Be a woman of courage—take a lesson from me. Have I not told you on former occasions that when circumstances require energetic action, I shake off the nervousness and the affectation of the woman, and buckle on an armour of strength and effrontery, such as men themselves might be proud to wear? Come, you must not remain too long away from the drawing-room. Go back—sustain your own spirits—and do all you can to cheer your sisters. And mind," added Mrs. Ranger impressively, "not a syllable—not a single syllable to either of them—least of all to Emma—relative to the decision to which I have come in respect to Bergami! I now go forth to find Kobolt and his gang, who, from what Maravelli told me this morning, are sure to be found dragging the lake at the jetty."

Having thus spoken, Mrs. Ranger hastened away from the apartment where the preceding colloquy had taken place; while Agatha, after remaining for a few minutes to compose her looks and settle her thoughts, went back to the drawing-room.

It was now nine o'clock, and Bergami had returned. When Agatha entered the room, she found him seated on a sofa, apparently engaged with a book; but he was in reality watching Emma's looks and manner, in order to see whether from any little circumstance he could possibly judge if she had betrayed to her sisters the scene which had taken place in the shade of the knot of trees. Presently the young lady, catching his look and perceiving in it a kind of inquiring expression, seized an opportunity to approach him under pretence of showing him a print at which she had been looking at the table; and as she bent down, she said in the lowest possible whisper, "I see that you are observing me—but I have *not* broken my word!"

"It is well," was the responsive whisper that came from the equerry's lips, accompanied by a look of deep meaning.

Emma felt her heart leap with joy at this species of renewed pledge of affection which Bergami had just given her; and she returned to her seat, scarcely able to prevent her feelings from being betrayed by her countenance.

CHAPTER CLXI.

FRESH SCENES AT THE JETTY.

THE Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas were sipping their wine at the *Hotel Royal*, between eight and nine o'clock, and discoursing on the object of their revisit to Geneva; and though there was evidently a forced familiarity subsisting between them, instead of the intimacy of friendship, they nevertheless were opening their minds pretty freely to each other.

"Well, but about this pretty Genevese girl of whom we were talking just now," said Malpas, after a brief pause in the discourse: "what do you propose doing with regard to her?"

"I will go and see her to-morrow," answered the Earl," and no doubt shall have a pretty scene of weeping, and bitterness, and reproaches, and so forth. But I must make up my mind to endure all that; and when the first ebullition of feeling has subsided, I shall enter upon the business-part

of the matter and propose a little annuity or something of the sort."

"Or else find some needy young fellow," observed Malpas, with a laugh, "who for a certain sum of money paid down will take the girl altogether off your hands and father the child when it is born."

"Well, perhaps I may do something in that way," rejoined Curzon, carelessly. "But the worst of it is the girl is rather sentimentally inclined and not mercenary. She is one of those tender-hearted creatures who *will* persist in loving when they themselves are no longer loved, and who cannot see or will not understand that they were taken for aught save the playthings of the moment."

But this heartless speech, so well worthy of an English aristocrat—who, by the bye, beats all the rest of humanity on the score of utter heartlessness—was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the waiter, who presented a note to the Earl of Curzon and then immediately retired.

"A lady's hand! a sweet beautiful hand!" ejaculated the nobleman, as he took up the billet.

"From the Owens?" demanded the Colonel eagerly.

"No doubt of it," was his lordship's reply. "Who else could write to us in Geneva?"

Thus speaking, he broke the seal and glanced his eyes over the note: then tossing it across the table, he observed with a self-satisfied air, "To be sure! did I not tell you how it would be?"

Malpas hastened to read the billet, the laconic contents of which ran as follow:—

"Emma and Julia, having maturely considered the request proffered by Colonel Malpas and the Earl of Curzon, and deeming it right to give them an opportunity of explaining their conduct, will meet them at half-past nine o'clock precisely by the jetty on the border of the lake."

"Brief enough," said Malpas; "but explicit as brief. What say you?—shall we stroll thitherward at once?"

"By all means," answered Curzon. "I am anxious to get the business over and my mission fulfilled as soon as possible. Depend upon it, I do not intend to dally for as many days as I did weeks on the previous occasion after my fair Julia. I shall tell her my mind as plain as possible, according to my instructions, and have done with it."

"And I shall pursue the same course with regard to Emma," said Malpas; "because I mean to travel into Italy and thence pass up the Mediterranean to Turkey——"

"Well, never mind your future plans," interrupted the Earl: "let us go forth and attend to present occupations."

Having lighted their cigars, Lord Curzon and Colonel Malpas issued from the hotel and sauntered through the streets towards the lake, so regulating their walk according to the time, that they reached the jetty about five minutes to the half-hour.

The night was beautiful. The sky was of a purply azure, studded with many a twinkling star: for the mist common to that clime and spot after sunset, had only just begun to settle on the surface of the lake and had not sufficiently expanded to mar the clear view of heaven above.

The Earl and Malpas walked to and fro in the immediate vicinity of the jetty, impregnating the air with the smoke of their cigars and speaking but little. They were not kept waiting beyond the time mentioned in the note: for scarcely had the clock-towers chimed the half-hour, when two female figures, closely veiled, passed suddenly round the massive wood-work forming the commencement of the pier, and accosted the two loungers.

"Ah! this is indeed kind of you," said Curzon, as one of the ladies immediately took him by the arm and began to draw him away from his companion Malpas, on whose arm the other lady fastened herself in a similar manner.

Curzon took the hand which rested upon his arm, and pressed it tenderly, at the same time observing, "Will you not raise your veil? Am I not to be permitted one kiss, Julia—one single kiss—after this absence? Or at all events may I not claim it as the reward for having come back to you? What! no answer? And yet methought that when you looked back at me for a single moment this evening, as you turned abruptly away with your sister Agatha, there was forgiveness in those sweet eyes of thine. But I suppose," continued the Earl, after having vainly paused for nearly a minute to see whether his fair one would vouchsafe a reply, "that you feel yourself so deeply offended that you must have an explanation before you confer the slightest favour. Is it so, Julia? Come—speak, speak!"

While the Earl was thus addressing his female companion, who was both cloaked and veiled, she had led him round the piles of the jetty so that they were now upon the opposite side from that where they had first met: or, to make the matter still more intelligible to the reader, we may observe that Malpas and his companion had remained on one side of the pier, while Curzon and his fair one had gone round to the other.

"Come now," resumed the Earl, having a second time paused to see whether any answer would be vouchsafed; "this silence is ridiculous—this affectation most absurd. I thought that I should find you in a better mood, Julia: I did not think you could shut yourself up in a sullenness like this. Well, if you will not answer me I must endeavour to unseal those sweet lips of your's. It is usually said that kisses seal woman's lips: but I must now see if they will not have a contrary effect."

Thus speaking, Curzon threw his arms round his companion and endeavoured to tear away her veil. But all in a moment she started a pace backward—threw up the veil of her own accord—and exclaimed, "Behold me!"

"What! is it possible?" cried the Earl, staggering back in utter amazement, as by the pure moonlight he discovered the features of Lady Prescott.

"Yes—'tis I—the plaything whom you tossed aside!" she instantaneously responded in a hoarse voice.

Then, even as the last words were still issuing from her lips, she raised her arm—something gleamed in her hand—the next moment there was a flash, accompanied by a report, and quickly followed by the ejaculation of "O God!" uttered in sudden agony. Then there was a splash as of a heavy body falling into the lake—and all was still on *this* side of the pier!

But on the *other* side the report of the pistol was echoed—not by a mere reverberation, but by a like sound emanating from a similar weapon: and there too was a momentary cry of death.

followed by a heavy splash in the lake—a gurgling sound—and the next instant all was still likewise on *that* side of the pier!

A few moments afterwards Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon met each other at the commencement of the jetty, as each was hurrying away from the spot where murder had been accomplished.

"You have done it?' said the one to the other, in the low hoarse voice of crime.

"Yes," was the answer, delivered in the same tone: and then they both hurried on towards the city without speaking another word—without even daring to exchange another look; for their's was now the companionship of crime—a hideous and a horrible companionship, which deadens all friendship, stifles all sympathies—raising up in their place gloomy suspicion, dark mistrust, and therefore mutual aversion.

Half an hour afterwards, when the mist had completely settled upon the lake and was veiling all the circumjacent scenery, three figures approached the jetty; and having satisfied themselves as far as they were able that the coast was clear, they began to enter upon their usual avocations. These were Kobolt, Walden, and Hernani, who having gambled away the money which they had received from Jocelyn Loftus, came to fling their nets into the lake in the hope of catching some of that "fish" for which they received so good a price from Dr. Maravelli. Indeed, as the doctor had a general order from the German Universities for as many heads as he chose to transmit for purposes of phrenological study,—and as he himself was passionately devoted to the use of the dissecting knife,—Kobolt and his gang always found a ready market for the "subjects" which they might procure. They therefore had *their* general order from the doctor for whatsoever they might fish up from Lake Leman; and what with

accidents, murders, and suicides, there was a tolerably good harvest to be reaped in this way throughout the year.

Having arranged their tackle, they proceeded to drag in the usual manner; and in a few minutes they brought up a dead body.

"Why, this *is* good luck indeed!" said Kobolt, as they drew the corpse under the jetty. "Now then, Walden, you be off and get down the cart."

"All right," said the individual thus addressed; and away he sped.

"Come, I don't like to be idle," said Kobolt to Hernani: "let us have another throw. Not that it is at all likely we shall get a second bite to our hooks on this occasion——"

"Why not?" asked the Italian. "It's all a chapter of accidents; and in the same way that for weeks together we have fished every night without dragging up anything, so have we also now and then got a couple of bites on the same night. Come, let us go and drag the other side."

Having despoiled the corpse of the money and watch in the pockets, and taken a ring from the finger,—congratulating themselves at the same time upon the value of the booty,—the two men passed under the pier, and proceeded to fling their tackle on the side which they now reached.

Good luck again attended them; and in a few minutes they brought another corpse to the shore; Their savage joy was now indeed great, the more so as this one likewise had gold in its pockets, a watch and chain in the fob, and a couple of rings on the fingers. But while they were yet despoiling it, the mist was swept somewhat away by one of those sudden squalls which often gush over the surface of Lake Leman; and the moonbeams poured fully down upon the face of the dead.

Ejaculations of amazement burst simultaneously from the lips of the two fishers of men, as they at once recognised that countenance!

"It is Smith, the Englishman!" said Kobolt. "And look—murder has been done—his shirt-front is stained with blood. See—it is not slime—and the water has not washed it out. Ah! the blood is evidently flowing still; and the corpse is as fresh as it can be. Why, this must have been done within an hour!"

"Come, don't let us stand dallying here," growled Hernani; "but drag the body underneath the pier until the cart comes."

This they did; and then, as their curiosity was now acutely sharpened, they drew forth the other corpse just far enough into the moonlight to enable them to examine it closely. Their astonishment was enhanced even into dismay on at once recognising the *other* Englishman, whom they knew by the name of Thompson, and who it was evident had likewise been murdered. But the latter had been shot through the head; for the mark was upon the brow, where the bullet had entered, and the skull was shattered where it had passed out again.

"Some fearful work has been done here this evening," said Kobolt. "What can it all mean?—how can it be?"

"I suppose," replied Hernani, "that if we were to stand here conjecturing for a month we should not find out. But when I come to think of it, we ought to be grateful to those who have done the deed: for in a very little time it has put a handsome booty in our way."

"Hush! I hear footsteps advancing," suddenly ejaculated Kobolt.

Then, having hastily dragged back the corpse of Malpas under the pier, they peeped forth from behind the massive and crowded piles. The moonlight was still pouring down upon the scene; and they were thus enabled to observe a female form approaching the spot. The rays fell upon the woman's countenance as she glanced quickly around in every direction; and as the keen eyes of Kobolt recognised her, he whispered to his comrade, "It is one of the old ladies belonging to the villa, that we carried off to Lausanne."

"Perhaps then," immediately suggested Hernani, also in a whisper, "she has had something to do with this murder of the very two men who employed us on that night—the occasion you speak of."

"Well, we have got nothing to do with all that," said Kobolt. "Let us speak to her."

They accordingly issued forth from beneath the pier and accosted Mrs. Ranger—for she it was. Instantaneously recognizing the two men, she at once told them it was they of whom she was in search. Kobolt laconically asked what she wanted; and she without much circumlocution proposed to them a certain thing, backing her explanation with the promise of a large reward. The amount thus named was tempting in the extreme; and the villains were not long in closing with her. As a matter of course *she* said nothing relative to the murders which the fishers of men had just discovered at the jetty—for the simple reason that she knew naught about them: and *they* did not think it worth while to intimate the subject to her, although in their own minds they felt pretty well convinced she was no stranger to the two dark deeds. In this surmise, however, they were utterly wrong, as the reader is already aware.

The interview between Mrs. Ranger and the two fishers of men did not occupy a quarter of an hour. Where the *employer* in a proposed crime is cool, collected, and determined, and the *employed* are willing, bribeable, and ready, there is no need of many words. Thus was it that the bargain was soon made: an earnest of the price was placed in Kobolt's hand—a full understanding as to the mode of procedure was entered into—and Mrs. Ranger sped back to the villa, muttering to herself, "The remedies I am adopting are desperate: but the position in which I am placed is also desperate. Murder must secure my impunity—and murder will do it!"

Thus congratulating herself on the means she had devised and was prepared to carry out, the harridan re-entered the royal dwelling.

CHAPTER CLXII.

THE DISSECTING ROOM.

It was about half-past eleven on this memorable night, and Dr. Maravelli was seated alone in his little parlour opening from the hall.

Loftus was in his own chamber, pondering upon the plans which he was putting into execution, and settling in his mind as to the exact details of the course which he should pursue when the three sisters were to make their appearance at midnight.

As for the Countess of Curzon and Lady Prescott, they were also sitting up: for they had not as yet dared to retire to rest, each deeply feeling that after the crime which had been consummated no sleep would visit their pillows. They were therefore holding companionship in the drawing-room, endeavouring to look satisfied at the tremendous work they had done, but unable to conceal from each other the fact that they now would give worlds to have it all undone again!

Return we however to Maravelli, who was alone in his parlour. But what was he doing there? Upon the table at which he was seated stood a phial labelled "Poison." That venomous drug had he been compounding in his secret laboratory up-stairs; and having brought it down with him to the parlour, he was now contemplating it with the air of a man who has obtained the means of accomplishing a certain object but trembles at the bare idea of using it. Not that it was so much the criminality of the contemplated deed which thus made him waver in his purpose; but it was the dread of being found out. Nevertheless, having duly weighed all the considerations that presented themselves to his mental view, he made up his mind to do the deed: for imagination suggested no other avenue of escape from the perils which threatened him, and which involved the hideous punishment of branding with a red-hot iron, to be followed by a long term of imprisonment.

But how was he to accomplish his murderous purpose? He thought of a thousand different plans. One was to mix some agreeable drink, infuse the poison therein, and take it up to his intended victims as if it were an act of a host's courtesy that he was performing. But no: this would not do. They might suspect—or they might refuse to drink at all—or the draughts might be partaken of by others beneath the roof. Moreover, as Lady Prescott was not alone, but had the other lady-lodger with her in the drawing-room, such a plan could not be carried out now; and the doctor felt that he could not visit her with a draught in her bedroom after she had retired to rest, without exciting suspicion by the very impropriety of the act itself. Much less dared he send her up a draught by his housekeeper, whom he would not trust in these dark schemes which he was now contemplating. Then how was he to proceed? To wait till the morning and poison the coffee which Loftus and Lady Prescott would partake of at breakfast! No—this plan was not feasible: opportunity might not serve—and moreover it would be dangerous to delay the deed and let the night pass without consummating it. Then how was he to act? He knew of no better, safer, or surer course than to enter their rooms respectively when they slept, and pour the poison between their lips: for it was of so fatal a nature that a single drop reaching the tongue would be followed by instantaneous death.

Yes—this must be the plan which he would adopt: and having resolved upon it, he was about to secure the bottle in a cupboard, when a somewhat violent ring at the bell startled him. So often, at about the same period of the night, had just such a sharp hasty ring been given before, that its meaning instantaneously struck him; and as he always made it a point to answer in person all summonses after a certain hour, he sped forth from his parlour and opened the front door. As he had anticipated, he beheld the three figures of the fishers of men, with their cart in the narrow street.

"Ah!" he said in a hasty whisper: "it is unfortunate you should come hither to-night; for I am particularly engaged——"

"But what are we to do, then?" demanded Kobolt gruffly. "We can't go and fling them back again into the lake; and as for taking them to our own lodgings, is out of the question."

"*Them?*" echoed Maravelli. "Have you more than one?"

"Yes—two fine fresh subjects—murdered too."

"Then indeed," ejaculated the doctor nervously, "does it become all the more requisite to get them out of the way. In with them—haste—lose no time!"

The three men did not require to be thus urged on; they soon dragged the two corpses into the hall, and bore them to the dissecting-room, Maravelli carrying the candle to light them.

"Ah!" ejaculated Kobolt, as he beheld the corpse of the infant already lying on the leaden table; "so you have got *that* here—eh?"

"We have not a minute for unnecessary discourse," said the doctor. "I have lodgers in the house——"

"Well, well," said Kobolt, "not another word; give us the money, and we are off."

This the doctor did in such haste that he dropped a few more gold pieces than he meant to do into Kobolt's hand; but the fellow did not choose to tell him of the mistake. He and his two comrades accordingly sped away, while the doctor hastened to summon Mavolta to mop up the marks of the wet where the corpses had been dragged through the hall.

Scarcely was all this done, when Loftus came down stairs; for it was now twelve o'clock. Encountering the doctor in the hall the moment after Mavolta had retired, he was struck by the agitated appearance of his countenance: and at once demanded—"Has anything happened?"

"Only that those fishers of men have brought me two subjects," replied Maravelli; "and I was of course obliged to have them taken into the dissecting-room."

"Well, it cannot be helped—you could not do otherwise, I suppose," said Loftus. "And now give me the key of that room."

"What! to-night?" asked the physician, who was utterly unacquainted with Jocelyn's intention relative to the Misses Owen, and who even did not know that he was expecting them.

"Yes—give me the key, I repeat," rejoined our hero sternly. "I have visitors coming here to-night."

"Visitors?" echoed Maravelli, struck with a mortal terror: for he fancied that these visitors would prove to be the officers of justice coming to arrest him.

"Ah! they are not such visitors as you fear," said Loftus, at once penetrating his alarms. "Have I not promised that you shall be held scatheless if you do my bidding?"

"Yes, yes—you promised me," murmured the doctor, trembling from head to foot: "but——"

At this moment there was another ring at the front-door bell.

"There! these are my visitors," said Loftus,

impatiently. "Give me the key. I swear to you they are not officers of justice—they are only the three Owens——"

"Oh! in that case take the key," said Maravelli, now breathing more freely.

"And you must remain with me, doctor," hastily rejoined Loftus, "as a witness of what is about to take place."

Our hero now hastened to open the front door, and at once gave admittance to Agatha, Emma, and Julia. They were all three enveloped in cloaks and closely veiled—being thus disguised to escape recognition during their nocturnal expedition from the villa to the physician's house, and (as they hoped) speedily back again.

The moment they entered the hall, Jocelyn closed the front door, and said, "Be pleased to follow me."

He then took up the candle which Maravelli had left standing upon a table in the hall, and at once led the way to the dining-room, keeping the physician close by him.

Be it remembered that the apartment which they had now entered was not the gloomy-looking little parlour previously alluded to, and on the table of which Maravelli had left the bottle of poison.

On entering the dining-room, Loftus closed the door; and turning towards the ladies, he said, "Have the kindness to raise your veils, that I may be assured that ye are really those whom I expect."

With this command, delivered in the firm tone of decision, the three sisters at once complied; and then Loftus beheld those three countenances which were so familiar to him—those countenances on which nature had lavished so much beauty, but which were now pale and agitated. He also was very pale: indeed his cheeks were colourless—while the firmness with which his lips were compressed showed that he had some difficulty in mastering his emotions and sternly carrying out that which he believed to be an imperative duty. As for Maravelli, he also was deeply agitated: for though relieved of any immediate fear on his own account, he nevertheless trembled at the strangeness of the present proceeding; and there was likewise something awful in the spectacle of that young man with the determined air of an avenging genius confronting those three pale and horror-stricken girls, at such an hour of the night, and under all the circumstances that had occurred!

"Now," said Loftus, at once resuming the discourse in the same firm voice as before, but likewise with a forced composure over a deep internal agitation,—"all that is about to take place must be promptly and rapidly done. To speak the truth, I know you all three too well to believe that you can be brought to a sense of the enormity of your crimes unless under extraordinary circumstances. To the influence of such circumstances am I about to subject you: and here"—pointing to Maravelli—"is the man who, having been to a certain extent implicated in one phase of your proceedings, must perform the part of a witness now. To a chamber of horrors am I about to lead you! Prepare yourselves for a shock: you will behold some ghastly objects—but on *one* only need your eyes be rivetted——"

"Mr. Loftus!" almost shrieked forth Agatha—and she would have fallen had not her sisters supported her; "you will not—you cannot—you dare not as a man——"

"Hush, hush!" was the quick whisper which Emma breathed in Agatha's ear. "You must confess nothing—it will be safer not."

"Well, sir," said the eldest sister, regaining her fortitude at this hint; "what horrors are these which you have in preparation for us?"—and she threw a ghastly look upon our young hero.

"Not for worlds," exclaimed Loftus, "would I submit you—wicked and depraved though you are—to this ordeal, if I thought you would confess everything of your own accord! Say then at once—say then," he repeated earnestly and impressively; "to whom were this man's services administered,"—and he again glanced towards Maravelli—"on that memorable night, three weeks ago, when a child was born within the walls of the Princess's villa?"

Agatha essayed to give some answer; but her tongue refused to perform its office, and she stood gazing in silent horror upon Jocelyn Loftus.

"Ask Dr. Maravelli," said Julia hastily, "whom he suspects to have been his patient on that memorable night."

"No," immediately exclaimed Loftus; "I require not mere suspicions—I want positive evidence. Remember, this is most serious—and the manner in which it will end depends wholly upon yourselves."

"For God's sake go through with the ordeal, whatever it may be," whispered Emma, as she stood behind her sister Agatha, whom she half sustained from sinking upon the carpet.

Agatha instantaneously regained a degree of composure—not so much on account of her sister Emma's encouraging words, as because a sudden idea struck herself. Indeed, she saw that if they were enabled to set Jocelyn at naught in the clue which he had obtained, it might yet be possible to have the whole matter hushed up so as to avoid the necessity of having murder done in respect to Loftus and Lady Prescott. That is to say, if they could manage to leave the circumstance of the child-birth in such doubt and mystery that the Princess should *still* remain an object even of the remotest suspicion, then was it probable that Loftus would be most anxious to avoid public exposure. Such were the thoughts which all in an instant swept through Agatha's mind, and impressed her with the importance of nerving herself to the utmost of her power to meet any horrors and go through any ordeal that might be in store for her sisters and herself.

"Miss Owen," said Loftus, fixing his eyes searchingly upon her,—"to *you* do I specially address the question relative to the birth of that child to which allusion has been made!"

"And I, sir," she answered, with a degree of composure that now astonished herself, "refuse to give any response where the honour of a lady is so deeply implicated."

"Then tell me," said Loftus, his voice and his look now assuming the deepest—the most awe-inspiring solemnity,—"will you consent to cast your eyes upon the remains of the infant whereof I am speaking, and all three swear in the presence of the corpse that, had it lived, it would *not* have been able to assert the claims of nature upon either of you three sisters?"

"We are prepared thus to swear," was Agatha's reply, delivered in a voice so unnaturally firm, and with a look so strangely resolute, that it seemed as if such preterhuman calmness could only be the prelude to a frightful reaction.

"Come, then," said Loftus: "the sooner the ordeal is over the better. Doctor, take one of the candles and lead on."

Thus speaking, the young man opened the dining-room door, and made way for Maravelli to pass out. He then beckoned the three sisters to follow; and this they did with a degree of firmness which amazed him, although so white were their countenances that they looked like moving corpses!

On issuing into the hall, Loftus hastened to unlock the door of the dissecting-room: and still bidding Maravelli lead the way, he stood aside to see the three sisters enter before him. And they did enter: but the moment they crossed the threshold, and when the sickly odour of the dead struck upon their senses, they shuddered visibly—stopped short—and suddenly turned towards each other, as if all their unnatural courage were now giving way at the supreme moment, and they were about to cling to one another for support. But again was Emma's courage the first to revive, and also to pour its inspiration into the souls of her sisters: for *she*, having all that Bergami had said uppermost in her mind, was animated with a confidence which *they* had not the same motive for possessing.

They therefore all three once again armed themselves with the utmost of their fortitude; and in this manner did they advance into the room. Maravelli stood by, holding the light; and Jocelyn Loftus, entering immediately behind the girls, closed the door.

But, Ah! what pen can depict the horror that now seized upon those unfortunate young women? Confusion and dismay—anguish and wonderment! While Agatha's eyes remained rivetted upon the corpse of her child, the looks of her sisters had been thrown upon those other two dead bodies that lay there: and as Emma at once recognized the countenance of her late paramour Colonel Malpas, Julia recoiled in affright from the first glimpse which she caught of the features of the Earl of Curzon. Then did a succession of agonizing shrieks thrill forth--followed by hysterics and fainting.

These were the quick and alarming consequences of the tremendous spectacle. But from the ejaculations of horror and the agonizing syllables which first thrilled from the lips of Emma and Julia, Loftus at once gathered that the dead bodies which by a coincidence that almost seemed providential had been brought hither that night, were those of the Earl of Curzon and Colonel Malpas, the two young women's paramours! Cruelly distressed at the turn which the drama had thus taken—having deepened into an excess of horror which he had little foreseen and was very far from intending—he hastened to throw open the door again; and by the doctor's assistance he bore the now fainting girls, one after the other, away from the terrific scene into the dining-room. Agatha, who had instantaneously caught the infection of her two sisters' wild terrors, and whose own nerves had been so painfully distended for some hours past as to be easily unstrung all in a moment,—had not swooned outright as Emma and Julia had done, but had burst forth into a kind of hysterical delirium, in which she unconsciously made all the confessions which Jocelyn Loftus had been so desirous to obtain.

Meanwhile, as we before stated, Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon—unable to retire to rest—were sitting together in the drawing-room. All on a sudden terrific cries, screams, and hysterical shrieks reached their ears; and as in their present state of mind a far less ominous circumstance than even this would have been sufficient to fill their souls with terror, they started up and exchanged looks of fearful import. Conscious guilt invariably associates with itself every occurrence that seems at all threatening, no matter how trivial or how foreign to its actual circumstances it may be. Thus was it that an indescribable horror, mingled with dread misgivings, seized at once upon the two patrician murderesses, and made them spring up from their seats as if suddenly galvanized. The screams continuing, the two ladies went forth on the landing. They heard the names of Curzon and Malpas thrilling forth upon voices fraught with rending anguish: and now their souls seemed to burn with the scathing effects of ineffable terror. The voice of the doctor was heard vociferating to Mavolta to bring water, vinegar, and smelling salts; and the quick sounds of footsteps through the hall, as the physician and Jocelyn conveyed the wretched girls to the dining-room, all tended to prove that something unusual, strange, and extraordinary was going on.

Wild with alarm, and her feelings now excited to a pitch utterly beyond endurance, Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon descended the stairs. On reaching the hall, they beheld two doors standing open, and from both of which lights were streaming. One of these doors Lady Prescott had never seen open before all the time she had been at the doctor's house; and perceiving that the other door which stood open was that of the dining-room, it naturally struck her that the shrieks of anguish she had heard had proceeded from the former place ere those who had uttered them were borne into the latter apartment. Quick as thought alone can travel, did this idea strike her; and impelled by a curiosity now excited to a fearful—indeed, to an awful pitch—she hastened towards that door which stood open at the end of the passage leading from the hall. Lady Curzon, inspired by kindred feelings, mechanically followed her; and together did they enter the dissecting-room, where the candle which Maravelli had left upon the table at once showed them the fearful objects that lay stretched on that anatomical board!

For the corpse of the child they had no eyes nor thoughts: all their attention—all their interest—all their ideas, were in a moment rivetted and absorbed in the dread spectacle of their two murdered victims, lying there stretched out before them!

For nearly a minute did they stand gazing in mute horror, their countenances ghastly pale, and with a paleness too which settling upon their olive complexions gave to their features a corpse-like hue similar to the faces of the dead. Then, as if simultaneously seized with the same goading terror, they turned away, exchanging a quick look of indescriba-

ble feelings, and passed forth into the hall again. As they proceeded side by side along the passage, they threw quick shuddering glances over their shoulders, in dire apprehension lest *something* should be following close behind!

In the confusion and dismay which prevailed inside the dining-room,—where Mavolta and the doctor were administering restoratives to Emma and Julia, and where Agatha was giving vent to her hysterical revealings,—the door, as already stated, had been left open. The eldest sister's confes ions were at this moment absorbing the entire attention of Jocelyn Lofius; and he observed not that the door was thus open—neither did he hear the sounds of footsteps nor the rustling of garments, as Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon were staggering past that open door, scarcely knowing whither they went, but both alike a prey to feelings which defied description.

The door of the sombre-looking little parlour, of which we have frequently spoken, was also standing ajar, and a light glimmered from within. Mechanically did the two ladies enter there; for they felt that their limbs were failing them and that they must sink with the exhaustion of terror and dismay, unless they reached some place where they could sit down. Lady Prescott threw herself into an arm-chair, an example which was instantaneously followed by the Countess of Curzon. Then with hollow eyes did they gaze upon each other, as if to ask what was to be done: for they both felt profoundly and terribly conscious of danger, although they knew not how to define it or whence it was to come.

"The lake has given up its dead!" whispered Lady Prescott, in accents low and hollow. "Is not this ominous of something dreadful?"

"Yes—my God! dreadful, dreadful!" returned Editha, wringing her hands." Oh! that the work of the last few hours could be undone!"

"Know you," asked Lady Prescott, under the influence of a tremendous consternation, "what is the punishment in Geneva—for——for——"

"For the crime of murder?" added Lady Curzon, mechanically.

"Yes—the guillotine!" answered Lady Prescott, with wild staring eyes.

"O horror!" rejoined the wretched Editha, shuddering with an ice-chill from head to foot.

"Ah!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, as her eye fell upon the bottle which stood on the table.

"What is it?" quickly demanded the Countess: then as she also caught sight of the label, she said, "Here! give it to me! It is Satan himself who has put it in my way!—I am tired of life—I am frightened to live! The guillotine—my God! the guillotine—Oh! no, no——"

And seizing the bottle from Lady Prescott's hand, the Countess of Curzon applied it to her lips.

"Ah! leave enough for me also," cried Lady Prescott, snatching the phial from her: but for a moment she stood transfixed with horror as she beheld the Countess of Curzon sink suddenly back in her chair and with one deep groan give up the ghost—for the poison was rapid and fatal in its effects as the dart of the Angel of Death!

All imaginable horrors, ten thousand times more fearful than any which had yet seized on the wretched Lady Prescott, now crowded in upon her. Death in every shape seemed to be within that house!—death in the dissecting room—death now in this gloomy parlour—before her eyes and in her imagination—death out-of-doors, in the middle of the great square of Geneva, and on the scaffold of the guillotine! Oh! the guillotine—heavens! what a thrill of ice-like agony did the idea, as it again flashed to her mind, send through her entire form!—so that maddened, frenzied, driven wild with the pressure of intolerable thoughts, the unhappy lady raised the phial to her lips and poured the residue of its contents down her throat. The effect was blasting as a flash of lightning. Not more quickly does the thunder-stroke of apoplexy perform its tremendous work——and down she fell, a corpse!

Meantime the hysterical cries which still came thrilling from Agatha's lips and went penetrating through the entire house, reached the ears of the Countess of Curzon's lady's-maid, who slept on an upper storey. This was none other than Gertrude—the handsome and wily Gertrude, who is already so well known to our readers. Terrified and dismayed at those sounds of female anguish which struck cry after cry, and with shriek following shriek, in quick succession upon her ears,—she leaped forth from her couch, hastily threw on some clothing, and descended the stairs. Guided by the cries, she came down as far as the hall; and halting near the dining-room door, listened to what was taking place within. She heard Agatha's unconscious and hysterical confessions—how it was indeed she who had given birth to the child whose corpse was in the dissecting-room; and Gertrude shuddered as she thus listened to those wild ravings relative to the dead!

While casting her eyes in the vagueness of a growing terror around, she observed the other doors which stood open; and catching a glimpse of the sinister shapes that lay on the table in the dissecting-room, thither was she impelled by a fearful curiosity, as terrible as it was irresistible. Entering that room, she beheld the child to which allusion had just been made in her hearing; and she also beheld the two corpses that lay stretched on the same table. Heavens! one was Malpas, her mistress's enemy—and the other was her mistress's husband! Yes—there was the Earl of Curzon, stark and lifeless,—he who had revelled in the virginity of Gertrude's own charms—there he lay, a mere inanimate heap!

Gertrude stood confounded. Of the double crime perpetrated that night by her mistress and Lady Prescott at the old jetty, she knew not: therefore well indeed might she be amazed and thus transfixed with mingled wonderment and horror on beholding those two corpses stretched out there. Staggering away—not knowing what to think—scarcely daring to think at all—but with terrible suspicions springing up in her mind, she retraced her steps into the hall; and still guided by the irresistible feeling of curiosity which amounted almost to a presentiment, she advanced towards the parlour-door. But now, as she reached the threshold of that sombre-looking little room, a cry—a wild and terrible cry, thrilling high above the hysterical outpourings of Agatha in the dining-room—burst agonisingly from the lips of the lady's-maid, as with the first glance her eyes embraced all the horrors of the scene. For there

sat her mistress in a large arm-chair, already livid and ghastly with the changing hues of a death produced by a quick and powerful poison—while on the floor, with glassy eyes that seemed to stare up at her awfully, was stretched Lady Prescott also becoming hideous beneath the finger of death!

Something seemed to give way in Gertrude's brain as she sent forth that thrilling, rending, piercing cry; then she stood motionless and silent for a few instants—and then, as persons issued from the drawing-room, the horrible laugh of a maniac burst from her lips.

Oh! this indeed was a night of horrors at Maravelli's house! The suicide of the two ladies seemed the crowning act of the tremendous drama thus represented there. Jocelyn and the doctor were the two persons who had rushed forth from the dining-room on hearing Gertrude's yelling cry; and we need scarcely say that they were overwhelmed with unutterable dismay on beholding the tragedy which had taken place. Loftus was the first to recover his presence of mind; and in a few quick but impressive words, he conjured the doctor to summon likewise all his fortitude to his aid, inasmuch as it was absolutely necessary to conceal from the three sisters this new incident which had occurred, lest the accumulation of so much horror upon horror, beneath the same roof and within the same hour, should prove more than their minds could possibly bear up against.

Mavolta was accordingly summoned forth from the dining-room to take charge of Gertrude, now a laughing senseless maniac; and the unhappy creature was induced to follow the old housekeeper up the stairs. The door of the little parlour was closed on the corpses of the two suicide-ladies; and all this having been done in the course of a few minutes, the doctor and Loftus returned into the dining-room, where the three sisters were now huddling together upon a sofa and endeavouring to imbibe confidence from each other's presence, as well as collect their ideas so as to look their actual position in the face. For Agatha had by this time grown calm,—yielding to the consolations, the entreaties, and the prayers of her two sisters, who had been recovered from the fainting condition into which they had fallen.

"Young ladies," said Loftus, on returning into the room with the doctor, "you need remain here no longer than you choose."

"But what are we to expect, Mr. Loftus?—what are we to anticipate?" inquired Agatha, who was still nervous and trembling all over.

"You must prepare to quit Geneva to-morrow," answered Jocelyn. "Understand me well—to-morrow must yourselves,"—and he glanced rapidly at the three sisters one after the other,—"take your departure from this city in company with Mrs. Ranger. Now you understand me; and I have no more to say. Unless indeed," he added, after an instant's pause, "you feel that in consequence of the terrible scenes which have taken place you would rather remain here for a while longer——"

"No, no," cried Emma impatiently: for now that her fortitude was returning, she recollected her appointment with Bergami. "Let us hasten hence this moment! Agatha—Julia," she added in quick whispers to her two sisters, "let us depart now directly."

They all three accordingly signified their desire to go thence; and Loftus, taking the candle in his hand, conducted them to the front door without uttering another word. But just as they were about to issue forth, he bethought himself of something which he ought to say in his own justification: for not even to such vile, depraved, and heartless girls as these, did he choose to appear in the light of a man capable of unnecessary cruelty.

"One moment," he said, just closing the door ajar ere the three sisters stepped forth from the house. "It is due to myself to inform you that the additional horrors of that room"—and he glanced towards the dissecting apartment—"formed no portion of my plan. Had I known *whose* remains those were that had been brought in by the resurrectionists of the lake, not for an instant should I have suffered you to enter thither!"

Having thus spoken, he again opened the door; and the three sisters, drawing down their veils and huddling close together, issued forth from Maravelli's house, just as the neighbouring church-clock was chiming a quarter to one. Thus was it that they had passed through three quarters of an hour of horrible feelings and rending mental tortures within those walls; and the silence, the darkness, and the loneliness of the bye-street into which they now emerged, constituted an indescribable relief after the whirl of harrowing emotions they had experienced.

After having thus afforded egress to the three sisters, Jocelyn Loftus hastened back into the dining-room where he had left Maravelli, and to whom he now said, "I am going out for an hour or two."

"Going out!" echoed the doctor, all his suspicions of evil suddenly reviving.

"Tranquillize yourself—I shall be back in a couple of hours, long before the city awakes for the business of a new day. Doctor Maravelli," added our hero in a solemn voice, and with a still more solemn look, "the last hour has been one of horrors such as I never knew before—such as God grant that I may never know again! Our duty is clear and apparent. So soon as the police-courts are open, we must repair to the authorities and relate everything that has occurred."

"Everything?" cried Maravelli, with haggard look.

"Depend upon it," rejoined Loftus, "I will save you from any unpleasant consequences. I have promised you this already, and I will keep my word."

He then put on his hat, muffled himself in a cloak, and issued forth from the physician's house.

Meanwhile the three sisters were hastening back to the villa. Emma, who relied upon the protection of Bergami, but who did not choose to inform her sisters of all that had taken place between herself and him, said everything she could think of to inspire them with an equal amount of courage and assurance. She represented to them that now the ordeal was past, the worst was known; and that all the harm or exposure Loftus intended them, was their prompt exile from Geneva.

"But even this decision may be counteracted," added Emma, in a peculiar tone of assurance, which was derived from the secret reliance she placed in Bergami.

Through the eldest sister's frame, however, did a sudden thrill of horror sweep, as she recalled to mind Mrs. Ranger's injunction relative to Loftus and Lady Prescott. "*If they are to live, then must you find the opportunity of breathing the word to Maravelli: but if they are to die, then nothing need be said and the doctor will do his work!*"

Such were the words Mrs. Ranger had whispered to Agatha during their interview of the evening: but the word had *not* been breathed in Maravelli's ear, and he therefore would do his work!

Ah! if Agatha only knew that Lady Prescott was already no more—that the poison had been used by suicide lips—and that Maravelli no longer dreamt of new crimes, but only thought of shielding the past ones,—she would have been spared this fresh paroxysm of horror and dismay which now seized upon her. But stricken speechless thereby, she gave no audible vent to her feelings: and as she thus walked with her two sisters in silence, they in the obscurity of night observed not the ghastly workings of her countenance.

CHAPTER CLXIII.

THE LAST ACT OF THE NIGHT'S TRAGEDY.

It is here necessary to remind the reader that when Bergami had absented himself from the dinner-table at the villa, under pretence of dining with a friend, it was for the purpose of hastening to Dr. Maravelli's house and making Jocelyn Loftus acquainted with all that had taken place during the few hours since they parted in the middle of the day. Thus Bergami had informed our hero of all the strange and startling revelations which he had wrung from Mrs. Hubbard, and all that had taken place between himself and the three sisters on the shore of the lake. He had also explained to Loftus word for word what he had said and done when left alone with Emma Owen; and ere they parted, it was then agreed that Loftus should repair to the villa during the night, immediately after his interview should have taken place with the three young ladies at Dr. Maravelli's.

It was in pursuance of this understanding with Bergami, that Jocelyn Loftus was now wending his way from the physician's house towards the villa; and while the three sisters were returning thither by the most direct route, our hero was taking the more circuitous path across the field. But then, as he proceeded at a much quicker pace than the Misses Owens he arrived at the point of destination before them.

On reaching the private door in the garden wall, he knocked three times; and it was immediately opened by Bergami, who had been there awaiting his coming for the last half-hour. In a few hurried words Jocelyn related to the royal equerry all the dreadful things that had occurred, and how the drama of the night had episodically merged into a terrific tragedy in respect to Lady Prescott and the Countess of Curzon. Bergami was horror-stricken on hearing of these frightful incidents: but as there was now little leisure for comment, he proceeded without loss of time to conduct Jocelyn into the villa. Ascending the back staircase together, they trod noiselessly, so as not to attract attention in case the sisters should have already entered or Mrs. Ranger should be upon the alert. But all was still—no one appeared—and Bergami led the way to his own chamber.

"I have come," said Jocelyn, as he threw off his cloak and hat, "because of the appointment which we made: but I should scarcely think that Emma will have the hardihood to perform the part which she promised you, considering everything that has occurred."

"But methought you said in the garden ere now," observed Bergami, "that you concealed the crowning tragedy from the sisters in consideration of their state of mind?"

"I did so," answered Loftus. "But the spectacle of her murdered paramour——"

"Murdered did you say?" cried Bergami, starting with horror.

"Yes: Colonel Malpas and also the Earl of Curzon were most foully murdered," rejoined our hero. "The marks of the fatal wounds were upon them——Ah! and must we not associate the suicide of those ladies with the dread crime of murder committed upon these two men?"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Bergami, "what horrors are growing out of these adventures wherein we are engaged! But did the spectacle of her murdered paramour produce so very powerful an impression upon Emma?"

"Rather of horror than of grief," rejoined Loftus. "I noticed moreover that she was the first to resume her fortitude——"

"Then depend upon it she will keep her appointment with me to-night," interrupted Bergami.

"You speak with confidence, Baron," said Loftus; "and I hope that it will prove as you conjecture. For if this one point be cleared up, then are our investigations complete in all their details. Agatha confessed, as I ere now told you in the garden, that she was the mother of the babe: she moreover admitted in her ravings that it was her sisters who personated the Princess in the ermine cloak and the green silk hood, which they had been enabled by their position about the royal person to borrow for the specific occasions when they were used——"

"Oh! what refinement of atrocious perfidy!" exclaimed the Baron, trembling with indignation.

"Let our consolation be that we have unravelled the complicated skein so sucessfully," observed Loftus: "and now it is the last knot which we are about to untie—that is to say, if Emma should really come."

"I am convinced of it," said Bergami, with the same air of confidence as before. "That young woman is devoured with insatiable passions: she is a perfect Messalina in her desires. Ah! Mr. Loftus, you can understand me when I assure you that never, never did I do such violence to my feelings in every respect as when affecting to fall into the snare which that syren spread for me! I hated the hypocrisy of the part which I was playing—hated it all the more bitterly because I was compelled to assume the passion of love where I in reality experienced naught but loathing and aversion! For beautiful as that young creature is, yet did her very touch send a cold shudder through me as if from the contact of a reptile. At the time that I was playing that hypocritical part and forcing myself to enact the character of a gross sensualist, it seemed to me as if I were committing

a crime. And then to permit her even for a moment to enfold me in her embrace——O God! it was dreadful!"—and the strong aversion which penetrated through Bergami's accents and looks, showed how really and truly his exalted nature recoiled from the degrading sensuality belonging to the part which he had enacted. "But I had assured you, Mr. Loftus," he continued, "that I would have recourse to every means in order to further our views; for it was the honour of a persecuted and injured Princess that had to be vindicated—and I was therefore prepared to go any lengths and make any sacrifice of my own feeling in order to accomplish that aim. I can assure you, however, it was the martyrdom of all my manly sense of propriety when I allowed myself to be pressed to that luxurious wanton's bosom! And it is because she is this utter profligate—this lascivious creature—that you and I both know her to be—it is for this reason, I say, that she will presently forget all the horrors of the last few hours, and giving the reins to her imagination, think of abandoning herself only to voluptuous delights."

"We shall see," observed Jocelyn. "The night is wearing on—they must have returned by this time—and if she mean to seek your chamber she will be here soon."

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Baron Bergami was right. Even while retracing her way with her sisters from Maravelli's house to the villa, did Emma give full scope to her licentious imaginings. She thought within herself that the pains of the night being over, the hour for its pleasures was now approaching, and in Bergami's arms did she hope to reap the reward of all that she had just undergone.

The three sisters stealthily re-entered the villa; and immediately separating from each other, they

sought their respective chambers. But Agatha, according to previous understanding, repaired in the first instance to Mrs. Ranger's room; and there she found the old harridan sitting up and anxiously awaiting her return. There was a screen drawn round one corner of the chamber; and as Agatha entered, Mrs. Ranger pointed significantly in that direction. A cold shudder thrilled through the young lady's frame, as she full easily comprehended what the sign meant—namely, that Kobolt and his two companions were concealed behind that screen.

"Now, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger, of course speaking in English and also in a low voice; "tell me in as few words as you can all that has taken place."

The young lady sat down on a chair close to the old one, and rapidly outlined the horrors through which she and her sisters had passed—as a matter of course not forgetting to describe how they had beheld the forms of the murdered Curzon and Malpas stretched upon the table in the doctor's dissecting-room. Mrs. Ranger was astounded at this portion of the narrative, the crime being characterized by so much real mystery in every respect. But she was not a woman likely to devote much time to speculation and conjecture, when it became necessary to act with decision: she accordingly asked, "How stands the matter, Agatha?—what words spoke you in Maravelli's ear?"

"I said nothing," was the response. "I was too much the prey to the wildest emotions of terror and grief to be able to settle my thoughts on any particular point. It quite escaped me, in the whirl of my ideas, that the lives of Loftus and Lady Prescott were, so to speak, in my own hand."

"Well, then, it is perhaps all for the better," said Mrs. Ranger, with the doggedness of determination. "Dead people tell no tales, and therefore it is better that the tongues of Loftus and Lady Prescott should be silenced than that we should be at their mercy. Since you did not speak the word, Maravelli will do his work. And now," she added with an emphasis and a look both alike of darkest meaning, "I shall do *mine*."

"You—you—are resolved then?" faltered Agatha, glancing with uncontrollable horror towards the screen, from behind which the rustling of garments and the whispering of coarse voices came.

"To be sure," rejoined Mrs. Ranger. "If Loftus and Lady Prescott are to die to-night, how is it possible to allow Bergami to live?"

Agatha spake not another word; but for nearly a minute she stood gazing in vacant terror upon Mrs. Ranger—not only in astonishment at the extraordinary firmness of that woman at other times so frivolous and full of affectations, but also as much as to ask whether it was possible that a murder so foul, so cold-blooded, was to be done that night within the walls of the villa?

"Retire, Agatha—retire," said Mrs. Ranger at length: "and in less than half-an-hour from this time all will be over."

Agatha still remained speechless: her tongue was parched—her throat was dry, as if she had been swallowing ashes; and yet it seemed that if she even for a single moment relaxed the strong hold that she was maintaining upon her feelings, she must give full vent to her anguish in one long, loud, and penetrating scream.

Mrs. Ranger pushed her gently towards the door; and Agatha, quitting the chamber, dragged herself along the passage to her own room,—where locking the door, she threw herself upon the couch, and burying her face in the pillow to stifle her cries, gave vent to all the tremendous anguish that for the last quarter of an hour had gathered and remained pent up in her almost bursting bosom.

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Meanwhile the voluptuous Emma, immediately on gaining her own apartment, had hastened to throw off her apparel. Then, unlocking a wardrobe, she took thence a frock-coat, a military stock, a pair of trousers with a stripe of gold lace on the outward seam of each leg, a pair of Wellington boots, and a hat.

If any one could have peeped into the chamber at this moment and beheld that young woman undoing her feminine toilette and preparing for her masculine one, it would have been impossible to believe that she had gone through such a severe trial as she had so recently experienced. Upon her countenance was no trace of those feelings which had ere now been so vividly excited at Maravelli's house: on the contrary, the flush of a blissful animation was upon her cheeks—the light of pleasure flashed from beneath the silken fringes of her hazel eyes—a sunny smile sat upon her lips, which so far from being dry and feverish with recent horror, were moist as wet coral and delicious as a rich pulpy fruit. Her bosom rose and fell with quick heavings, but not indicative of either affliction or alarm. No—these voluptuous undulations of that superb bust were produced by the anticipations of love's delight which fired the soul within.

She disapparelled herself, we say, of all her feminine gear, and then began to assume the masculine garb which she knew became her so well. Even to her very corset had she laid aside; and though the rich contours of her bust depended not upon artificial support or compression for their shape, roundness, or firmness, yet was it now easier to imprison those glowing globes of snow within the tightly-fitting frock coat. The Wellington boots, made with such exquisite delicacy, fitted her beautifully-shaped feet in the most faultless manner—the upper leathers ascending to the middle of the swell of her robust but admirably modelled legs. The pantaloons, however, were made somewhat wide and with large plaits, so as to conceal the feminine shapeliness of the limbs, and give them the appearance of that undeviating straightness which especially characterises the male figure. Her hair was arranged in such a manner as to flow in a luxuriant mass upon her shoulders; and when this was done, she proceeded by the aid of gum-water to fasten a pair of false whiskers in their proper place. This she did with an air so coquettish—so full of arch delight—that it was less possible than ever to believe she had undergone such exciting fluctuations of feeling during the few past hours. But now, came another of the finishing touches to this masculine toilette,—namely, the fastening on of the exquisitely-fashioned false moustache. Above her short upper-lip did she affix it in

the most artistic manner; and then, as she gazed at herself in the mirror, with that delicately-pencilled, glossy, and curling appendage to her luscious mouth, she fancied that it gave a more mischievous expression to her features and a delightful archness to her smile. Resplendent as pearls already were her beautiful teeth: but if it were possible, that dark moustache made them appear still more brilliant by the contrast; and when she fastened below the nether lip, just where the chin formed its beauteous dimple, another little artificial contrivance of hair to serve as an *imperial*, her delight became absolutely childish. Indeed, as she surveyed herself in the full length mirror before which her masculine toilette was achieved, she looked like a radiant being without a care, and who had never even known what a ruffled feeling was—dressing for some masquerade where she was to enjoy the full measure of characteristic delight.

Long as it has taken us to describe the process of this toilette, it did not occupy Emma above twenty minutes altogether; and now, as she threw a last look at herself, she murmured with an air of supreme satisfaction, "Never did this attire seem to become me so much before!"

And truly it did become her well,—setting forth the exquisite symmetry of her shape without concealing its feminine contours. Indeed, it could be but at a distance, or in an obscure light, and when only a hasty glance was thrown upon her, that she could be taken for one of the male sex—much less Bergami himself, whose noble height she altogether wanted. Besides, it were easy to perceive, when gazing close or in a clear light, that she was a female disguised—not merely from the delicacy, the softness, and the polish of her skin—nor from the silky glossiness of the dark brown hair—nor from the seductive look of wantonness which beamed in her mischievous eyes and shed the subdued light of soft sensuousness over her entire countenance, whiskered and moustached though it were; but it was also from the rich development of that bust which the tight-fitting frock could not possibly flatten and only partially restrain and compress. But even as she drew herself up to her full height, and by throwing back her shoulders endeavoured to make the most of a stature which was not even tall for a woman, it seemed as if with the expansion thus given to the chest, the glowing orbs would burst forth from their prisonage; and in this manner did the projecting development of bust, apart from all other circumstances above detailed, betray the woman in the masculine garb.

We will not however linger at greater length upon a portraiture which assuredly had its delicious attractions. Sad—oh! sad, indeed, is it to reflect that this creature so lovely, was not so virtuous as she was beautiful—that this being so seductive, was not so chaste as she was fascinating!

The masculine toilette, then, being completed, Emma Owen prepared to sally forth from her chamber. One last look did she fling upon the mirror where her symmetrical and at the same time voluptuous shape was so faithfully reproduced upon the polished surface; and with her spirits elevated to the highest pitch, through the very feeling of satisfaction which she experienced, she turned away and issued from the room. Ah! how her heart palpitated now with the anticipation of ineffable joys, as she pictured to herself the handsome Bergami, who, as she thought, was in a few brief minutes to strain her, warm, palpitating, and glowing with love and passion, in his arms—that handsome Bergami whose miniature counterpart she had apparelled herself to seem!

The passage was feebly—very feebly lighted by the lamp that burnt there, but which was now flickering towards extinction. Indeed, the gloom was so deep that it would have been impossible to discern a figure a dozen yards a-head. All was silent in the villa—silent as the grave, as Emma stole with noiseless steps along the corridor.

But suddenly she pauses and listens. That deep silence has just been broken by a sound as of the turning of the handle of a door. Yes—she cannot be mistaken: it is so—and moreover it is the door of Mrs. Ranger's room whence the sound emanates. It opens—a head peeps forth—it is Mrs. Ranger's: and the next instant it is withdrawn again. But the words, "*'Tis he, now in the passage!*" uttered with exceeding rapidity by Mrs. Ranger inside the room, reached Emma's ears; and she, instantaneously fancying that the old lady was positively and actually taking her *this* time for Bergami himself, laughed inwardly as she continued her way along the passage.

Once more all was quiet. Mrs. Ranger's door had closed again; and Emma did not choose to waste a single moment in inquiring why the old lady was up still, and what she was doing when peeping forth into the passage. No—not an instant could Emma spare from the time which was now so precious, and was to be devoted as soon as possible to the delights of love!

And now the door of Bergami's apartment was gained—and Emma was about to knock gently with her delicate fingers, when she suddenly became aware of the stealthy creeping of some one near her. She turned round abruptly; and the look that she threw was the last that ever flashed from her eyes in this life. For at the same moment her throat was grasped by hands of such iron strength, that the cry which rose up in her terror was stifled in an instant—utterly subdued, ere even the very breath on which it was to be wafted forth could issue from the quivering lips! Simultaneously with this vigorous and effective assault, a long sharp dagger was driven deep down into the unfortunate young woman's bosom—and penetrating her heart, death was instantaneous!

This fearful deed occupied not a minute: and so noiselessly was it performed, that Mrs. Ranger, who was inside her room holding the door ajar and listening attentively, could scarcely hear the sound of even the faintest struggle. But nevertheless there was just a sufficiency of noise to reach the ears of Bergami and Loftus within the room at the door of which the tremendous tragedy took place. Thinking however it was Emma groping her way thither—perhaps in the dark—they only opened the door gently. But as the light streamed forth from the chamber, what a spectacle met their view! Cries of horror burst from their lips; and at the same time their ears caught the sounds of rapidly retreating footsteps.

Then rang the alarm of murder through the house—that terrific cry bursting like the knell of doom upon the ears of startled sleepers in the

depth of the night! But along the passage sped Loftus and Bergami: down the stairs they precipitated themselves—and on the landing below they overtook the three assassins, upon whom they seized and who turned to defend themselves. Here it was pitch dark; and the struggle took place in the dense obscurity. Loftus and Bergami, having each grappled with his man, held them fast with desperate tenacity; and a third remained to attempt the rescue of his friends, but dared not use his dagger to stab at random in the dark, lest he should wound them instead of their assailants. As for the two men themselves who were thus seized upon, so firmly were they pinioned by our hero and the royal equerry, that though violent were their struggles, yet were their arms held fast and they could not use their weapons.

In less than a minute the villa was all alive—doors were opening—female voices were heard giving vent to deafening shrieks—and the men-servants came rushing down from the uppermost storeys. Lights were brought to the scene of action; and there Hernani and Walden were found safe pinioned in the grasp of Bergami and Loftus—while Kobolt, the moment the gleam of the first light flashed upon the figure of the royal equerry, was seized with so mortal a terror that he staggered against the wall, his limbs becoming as heavy as lead and disabling him from flight. For it naturally struck him that this was the same person whom but a minute or two back he had felt assured that he had left *dead* at the end of the passage above!

The capture of the three men was now effected without much difficulty by aid of the domestics who appeared upon the scene; and from something which Kobolt in his terror and bewilderment let fall from his lips, Loftus and Bergami at once proceeded to Mrs. Ranger's room. They knocked at the door; and in a voice of alarm from within she asked, "Who is there?"

"Open, madam—open," exclaimed Loftus, in a commanding tone.

"No—no—I cannot—I am undressed," half screamed the wretched woman, all her courage breaking down in a moment: for it struck her that the murderers had been arrested and that everything was discovered.

Without another word did Bergami and Jocelyn burst open the door; and instead of finding Mrs. Ranger disapparelled, they at once perceived that she had not laid aside a single article of raiment, nor made the slightest preparation to retire to rest. From their looks did she gather the full confirmation of all her direst terrors; and falling at their feet she extended her arms, crying, "Mercy, mercy!"

"Wretched woman!" exclaimed Bergami, "what horrors have you been guilty of! Murderess that you are, what pardon can there be for you?"

Mrs. Ranger heard no more—her senses were abandoning her—and with a hollow moan of deepest despair, she sank down in a death-like swoon.

Meanwhile a distressing—oh! a wildly distressing scene had occurred close by. Alarmed along with the rest of the household by the cry of murder which Loftus and Bergami had sent forth, Agatha and Julia had issued from their chambers to find that their sister, from whom they had parted but little more than half-an-hour back in the fullness of vigorous health, was now a lifeless bleeding corpse. Oh! what ineffable anguish was now experienced by those two young women—and how tremendous was the remorse that sprang up in their guilty souls, on perceiving at the first glance that one of the very means adopted to achieve the ruin of the Princess, had redounded upon their own heads! For they understood it all: their unfortunate sister had been mistaken for Bergami—and attired in the apparel wherewith she was wont to personate him, had thus met a premature and dreadful death!

But we must draw a veil, at least for the present, over the manifold feelings excited by the incidents of this dreadful night. Suffice it to say that the police authorities were immediately fetched from Geneva—that Mrs. Ranger and the three murderers were borne off to prison—and that Agatha and Julia, now in a state bordering upon frenzy, were left at the villa under the surveillance of an officer of justice.

CHAPTER CLXIV.

THE SPUNGING-HOUSE.

In a dirty, dingy-looking, dust-begrimed parlour at Mr. Moses Ikey's spunging-house in Fe ter Lane, Mr. Emmerson was pacing to and fro. Bars were at the windows; and though the sun was shining brightly—for it was mid-day—its beams were deadened by the dirty medium of the window-panes, which appeared as if they had not been washed outside since the last rain a fortnight back, while their inner side appeared utterly innocent of any contact with water at all. The furniture was heavy and massive, but in a sadly neglected condition: indeed it was impossible to walk a step on the carpet without raising a cloud of dust, or to place the finger anywhere without leaving a spot where the dust was thus lifted away.

The door was kept locked; and whenever Mr. Emmerson wanted anything, he had to ring the bell about a dozen times before the summons was answered. Then, when a dirty girl with red hair and an unmistakable Hebrew physiognomy, did condescend to make her appearance, she took double the time to procure what he asked for. If he required to take exercise, he had to descend into a little yard at the back of the house, about sixteen feet wide by thirty in length, and having an arched iron grating over-head, so that it seemed like walking to and fro in a cage.

Exactly three weeks had Mr. Emmerson been at the spunging-house, raising heaven and earth to extricate himself from his pecuniary difficulties, in order that he might escape out of the country before the forgery should be discovered. But each day beheld his position growing more and more hopeless; and refusals as well as rebuffs came from every quarter to which he thought of applying. He had induced his wife to make an earnest appeal to her relations for a loan; but here again a negative was experienced. Executions were put into the house at Clapham—everything was swept away—furniture, plate, horses, carriages, all the emblems, symbols, and appurtenances of luxury and ostentation—away they went! The ruin was

complete; and Mrs. and Miss Emmerson, after having cut such a dash in that neighbourhood, were compelled to sneak away in a hackney-coach after dusk, a trunk and a bandbox containing the few articles of clothing which they had been enabled to abstract from the greedy grasp of the sheriff's officers. Then taking refuge in a small furnished lodging in Fetter Lane, so as to be near Emmerson, the unhappy women were taught the bitter lesson of overweening pride in its ignominious fall.

Three weeks, we say, had Emmerson been in the spunging-house; and so far from progressing a step towards emancipating himself from his difficulties, each day—each hour—beheld him sinking more deeply down. It is true that he had nearly two thousand guineas about his person, and the fact of which he could not conceal from his wife and daughter, although he begrudged them the few shillings which he doled out for their support. He husbanded every farthing as closely as he could, in the hope of being enabled to settle with his detaining creditor, so as to quit the country ere the forgery should be discovered: for in those times the punishment of forgery was death!

It was noon, on the twenty-first day of his captivity, that we thus find him pacing to and fro with agitated step in the private room at the spunging-house. Be it remembered that the forged bill was drawn at twenty-one days after date: but then there were the three days grace—and it wanted then exactly these three days to the time when the discovery of the forgery would be inevitable. Three days had the wretched Emmerson to save himself from the scaffold! Heavens, what a brief interval for the accomplishment of so gigantic a task! And the guilty man felt that it was so: hence the fearful state of excitement in which we now find him—pacing to and fro—turning and turning with a restless, horrible anxiety!

He had sent his wife to make a communication to his detaining creditor, which he hoped would have the effect of inducing that individual to come to terms; and he was now awaiting in excruciating suspense the issue of his wife's errand. Presently she returned; and the moment she made her appearance in the room, Emmerson devoured her with his inquiring eyes.

She was an affected, vulgar woman, of no very prepossessing appearance, and even in her poverty still clung to a certain tawdriness which but ill supplied the place of vanished splendour. Throwing herself upon a chair, she began by complaining bitterly of the dreadful nuisance of having to walk through the crowded streets after having been accustomed to ride in her carriage; but Emmerson cut her short by demanding sharply whether she had seen his detaining creditor.

"Yes, I have," she answered, apparently indifferent to her husband's acute suspense, which she could not fail to perceive, although she was very far from suspecting the crime whose terrors had rendered it so poignant.

"Well, what did you tell him? and what did he say?" demanded Emmerson sharply. "Will he come to terms?—yes or no?"

"I can't say for positive," was the response given by his wife: "he will send up and let you know presently."

"Presently! Good God—more suspense—more agony of waiting!" muttered Emmerson to himself: and for a moment he felt that he could have screamed out—that he could have fastened his hands in his hair and torn it by the roots—as if indeed he were going mad: but subduing his emotions with a mighty effort which in itself was agony, he turned again to his wife, saying, "Tell me everything—what you said to him—how he took it—how he looked—the very words he uttered in reply?"

"Lor, my dear, how very particular you are!" said his wife. "One would really think that instead of being only in a lock-up house you was in Newgate—and instead of standing the chance of going to the King's Bench you was afraid of going to the scaffold. But gracious goodness, Emmerson! don't look at me like that! You positively frighten me!"

"It's nothing—nothing," said her husband in a low hoarse voice: and indeed he felt that his looks *were* ghastly at the moment—for the sensations which tortured him were the concentrated essence of ten thousand agonies. "Tell me, I say, all that took place between you and the man who keeps me here."

"Well, I will," said Mrs. Emmerson. "I found him in his counting-house, and told him who I was. His looks immediately became quite glum, and his manner as stiff as possible. I said I wanted to speak to him very particular. He shut the door and desired me to proceed. I then told him you had exactly eighteen hundred and fifty guineas, which you would give him to let you out: if not, you meant to become bankrupt at once and give the money up to all your creditors, so that there wouldn't be two shillings in the pound."

"And what did he say *then?*—how did he look?" demanded Emmerson eagerly: "did it seem to touch him? I am sure he *must* have unbent a little. Tell me—did he not unbend?"—and the wretched man, in his soul's writhings, was thus straining madly to catch at the slightest straw of hope in his sinking desperation.

"No—I can't say that he did," replied his wife, who, entertaining not the least affection for her husband, did not think it necessary to invent a consolation which existed not.

"Ah! he did not unbend, then? But did he seem to believe you?"

"It's difficult to say—because he looked so cold and stiff."

"Well then, what on earth *did* he say?"

"He appeared to consider for about a minute: then he opened a great book—turned to the letter E—ran his finger down a column—and stopping at a particular place, said that you owed him three thousand four hundred guineas, besides the expenses; and that before he gave any decision he must consult a friend."

"Ah! a friend," muttered Emmerson between his set teeth, as his thoughts fixed themselves on Varian,—"a friend perhaps to *him*, but a bitter unrelenting foe to *me!*"—then again turning to his wife, he said aloud, "Well, what next?"

"Nothing more—only that he would let you know in the course of the day—and then he opened the door for me to go out. So as I was coming along, I thought to myself that all this was a judgment on you for having let yourself be made a fo

of by West End Countesses, and spending your money on such-like great ladies who are no better than they should be: for it's no secret that the Earl of Curzon's proctor is going to bring an action against you and Lord Sackville for *crim. con.*"

"Enough of all that!" interrupted Emmerson sharply. "If I have had my faults, you have had your's—I mean in the shape of extravagances——"

"Ah! but it is much worse," rejoined his wife, "to go gallivanting about with loose characters, by which means you bring your family into troubles and bothers of all kind."

"Enough, I say!" ejaculated Emmerson, flying into a passion. "And now leave me—I have letters to write. Come back in the evening, if you choose."

"Well, well—perhaps I may," answered his wife: and she soon afterwards took her departure, little thinking in what a dreadful state of mind she left her husband, and not being likely to care much even if she had known it.

Again did Emmerson pace to and fro in that apartment, which under any circumstances would have been dull and gloomy to a degree, but which now seemed of a dulness and gloom beyond all possibility of description. Heavens! what tortures did that man's brain experience as thus, like a chafing lion in its cage, he turned and turned in that narrow space. Oh! and there is something dreadful, dreadful, in turning thus often and often; for it shows that the mind is filled with a restlessness that is in itself an excruciation!

He looked at his watch; it was now one o'clock. An hour passed; never, never had an hour dragged itself along with such leaden footstep. Another hour wound its slow length along with a more wearying tardiness still: and yet no one came. Ah! was it a mere excuse of the creditor to get rid of the importunity of his debtor's wife? Emmerson began to fear so. But still he clung to hope. Good God! how could he do otherwise? for the pitch of desperation was passed—and because this very agony of agonies was transcended, did it become necessary to fall back upon hope again to save the brain from bursting or from going mad.

It was past three o'clock, and the front door bell rang. There had been many rings during the last two hours; and on each occasion was Emmerson's suspense excited to the utmost degree. Now again, therefore, did he experience the same thrilling, throbbing, rending, excruciating agony: for everything at present appeared to him a matter of life or death.

Footsteps ascended the stairs: then a key turned in the lock of his door. It was opened—and a visitor entered.

"Varian!" said Emmerson, his heart sinking within him as he encountered the look of his ex-clerk: then staggering to his seat, he all in a moment felt the necessity of becoming civil—nay, even servile, cringing, and grovelling to that man whom he knew to be the arbiter of his destiny.

It was difficult to gather from Varian's look the mood in which he was towards his imprisoned master. The young man's countenance was fixed and almost passionless: it might have augured a relenting sorrow for Emmerson's fallen condition—or it might equally as well have betokened cold implacability. All this the miserable captive saw at a glance; and he caught greedily at the ray of hope which pointed to the former. Yet it was hoping in desperation's despite—for deep and dark was the misgiving which at the same time struck to Emmerson's soul.

"I come, sir," said Varian, in a voice the accents of which were as dubious as his looks, leaving nothing of his humour or intent to be gathered from them,—"I come, sir, from your detaining creditor, who, as I told you on the night of your arrest, left the matter entirely in my hand!"

"Yes, yes—Mr. Varian—I know what you said—I recollect it full well," interrupted Emmerson, quivering with nervous excitement. "Well—and you have recommended him to be merciful? You—you——"

"Be pleased, sir, to listen to me," said Varian. "I have come to deliver myself of a message, and likewise to address you in a few words relative to some little matters concerning which I think you ought to be enlightened."

"Yes—but the message from the creditor—the message—the message?" repeated Emmerson, absolutely pitiable in his unmanned nervousness and the abject impatience of his suspense.

"Permit me to preface what I am about to say on the creditor's behalf with a few observations on my own account:"—and thus speaking, Theodore Varian seated himself in a chair with the cool deliberation of one who is not only resolved to perform a particular part, but also to take his own time in doing it.

Emmerson resigned himself to a prolonged interval of the cruellest suspense: but so desperate was his position, that he feared to anger the young man by any farther demonstration of impatience.

"In the first place, Mr. Emmerson," resumed Theodore Varian, in that cold measured voice and deliberate manner which was the same as heaping torture upon torture—agony upon agony—in respect to the miserable wretch who wished only to hear one word—*yes* or *no*—so that it might be decisive of his fate,—and if of the very worst, at least put him out of suspense,—"Mr. Emmerson," said Varian, "in the first place I wish to enlighten you on a few of those proceedings which since my return into your service I have been conducting against you. It was I who threw in your way those newspapers that contained such flaming accounts of speculations and enterprises which I full well conjectured to be worthless; and in your greediness to augment your gains, as well as to counterbalance your extravagances, you nibbled at the bait. Next, when your vanity led you to stand as a candidate for the aldermanic gown of one of the City wards, I went among those who had promised you their support; and thus was it that although your canvass gave promise of complete success, the result of the poll proved the most mortifying—the most humiliating! At the moment you were vapouring and declaiming about '*our blessed Constitution*,' '*our glorious laws*,' and '*our admirable social system*,' I was darkly and insidiously undermining you amongst all your civic friends. To *me*, then, did you owe your defeat; and secretly I gloried in your discomfiture. Then, about the same time, you began to observe that many of your most influential City friends began to look coldly upon you. It was I who

secretly propagated rumours tending to destroy your character, and consequently to diminish your credit. I managed—though with some little difficulty—to scrape an acquaintance and form an intimacy with a clerk at your bankers'——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Emmerson, with a sudden start; for his guilty conscience instantaneously suggested to him that Theodore had most probably become acquainted with the fact of the bill so near due.

"And from that clerk," continued Varian, without appearing to take the slightest notice of either Emmerson's ejaculation, or of his increased perturbation of manner,—"from that clerk I learnt the exact state of your account, and I told him enough to induce him to put his employers on their guard towards you. Ah! I knew full well at the time that the bankers wrote you a peremptory letter, desiring that your account should be placed on a more satisfactory footing; and I also knew that you applied to several capitalists for an advance of funds. *There* also was I secretly at work: and I took good care that the evil rumours I spread concerning your financial position, should reach their ears. Hence the mortifying refusals which you received one after the other, and which struck you blow upon blow—every one of which became duly known to me! Nor was I idle in other ways to do you a mischief. I sought excuses for calling upon those well-to-do tradesmen who occasionally did business with you; and I told them where they might obtain pecuniary accommodation on cheaper terms than at your office—so that even your very business rapidly fell off. Then, day by day, as I beheld the catastrophe coming, and ruin advancing upon you with giant strides, I paid frequent visits to the neighbourhood of Clapham and circulated reports relative to your embarrassed condition. In the City, too, I stirred up all your tradesmen against you, and secretly advised your creditors to press for the prompt settlement of their claims. How well I succeeded in all these engines of destruction which I brought to bear upon you, *you* best know; and when at last the crisis came—aye, and I knew full well when it *did* come—I was not blind to the fact that you intended to collect together as much money as possible, wherewith to decamp from the country. But in order to lull you into temporary security, so that the final blow might fall all the more terribly, I did my best to get together as much money as I possibly could for you. Then did I observe the joy which you could scarcely conceal: and you thought yourself secure. I watched you—I dogged your movements. Having already come to a secret understanding with your principal creditor, in respect to the course to be adopted, I sent to let him know that the time had come to act; and the sheriff's officer was speedily in attendance. You know the rest; and in your present position may you appreciate the folly—the utter folly, as well as the transcending iniquity, of all your former conduct towards *me!*"

"Yes, yes—I have indeed been dreadfully punished!—aye, and I am dreadfully punished *now!*" exclaimed Emmerson. "But you have relented—you are satisfied with your vengeance——"

"Listen!" interposed Varian, still in that cold passionless style which left Emmerson in the suspense of such torturing doubt as to what the young man's ultimate intentions were,—"I have a few more words to say—but only a very few. You have just learnt from my lips how steadily, continuously, yet determinedly I have pursued my vengeance against you: but you have yet to learn that it was I who gave information to the Earl of Curzon relative to your intrigue with his wife. Yes—and that very amount of five thousand guineas which you despatched to the Countess in the brown paper parcel, fell into the Earl's hand, through my intervention. Ah! would you not like to have that money now?—would it not enable you to emancipate yourself from all your present difficulties?"

"But—but—do you not think," asked Emmerson,—"is it not possible——in a word, do you—do you mean to prosecute this implacable feeling to the last? Have you no mercy?"

"Had *you* any mercy for *me?*" demanded Varian, his manner now undergoing a slightly perceptible change, and the light of a deeply concentrated hatred gleaming in his eyes.

"But did I not take you back again into my service?" asked Emmerson, trembling all over in the agony of suspense.

"Yes—but through no favour for me," replied Varian, with increased bitterness of tone.

"At all events," said Emmerson, "you have had your revenge. By your own admission you have ruined me."

"And did you not ruin me?—did you not plunge me into Newgate, and compel me to pass through the ordeal of shame and infamy?" cried Theodore, now rising from his seat and fixing his looks with unmistakable hatred upon the wretched Emmerson. "What though I obtained a pardon? it was a mere release from the danger of punishment—it could not efface that branding mark of infamy which you fixed upon me! Besides, did you not seek the ruin of my sister?—did you not endeavour to make me, her brother, the pander to your infamous designs upon her? Mr. Emmerson, your guilt has been damning—your conduct towards me atrocious and infernal! Can you wonder, then, that I seek the deadliest vengeance? By heaven! I were a coward—a traitor to the very name of *man*—did I tamely submit to all the wrongs I have received from you! Yes—I *have* accomplished your ruin, and I glory in it. And now, let me in conclusion tell you that your detaining creditor will *not* take one shilling less than the whole amount: because I have privately assured him that to my certain knowledge he will get every farthing if he only holds out. In a word, I have persuaded him that you have thousands in your possession, but that your aim is to cheat your creditors, and to keep as much as you possibly can for yourself."

"But what you have said is false!" cried Emmerson, now furious with rage.

"I know it," said Varian coolly; "but you cannot persuade your creditor to think otherwise than what I have told him!"

"We shall see," rejoined Emmerson, doggedly. "Now then our interview need last no longer."

"Ah! you think that you will be enabled to escape from the web wherein I have enmeshed you?" cried Varian; "but you are mistaken! In three days more that bill which you discounted at your banker's, will fall due; and when presented for payment, we shall see whether it is a forgery or not!"

Gasping for breath—with hideous workings of his countenance, and with trembling limbs—the wretched Emmerson fell back annihilated in his

seat; and as at that moment the dirty servant-girl came to lay the cloth for his dinner, Theodore Varian availed himself of the opportunity of the door being unlocked to quit the room. But ere he disappeared, he flung back one last look of the bitterest hate and direst malignity upon the wretched man whom his vengeance was thus consigning to perdition.

Three days afterwards the bill came due, and was pronounced to be a forgery. Criminal proceedings were forthwith adopted; and Mr. Emmerson—the once opulent money-broker, and member of the Common Council—was transferred to Newgate.

CHAPTER CLXV.

HOPES AND INTRIGUES IN THE CONDEMNED CELL.

TEN days afterwards the sessions commenced at the Old Bailey, and Emmerson was placed upon his trial. As the fallen man stood in the dock, he presented a piteous spectacle indeed to the view of those assembled. All vital colouring had left his countenance, which was hideous in its ghastliness, and the dread expression of which was heightened by the unnatural fever-light that burnt in his wild staring eyes. Most assuredly he did not *then* look like a man who was in much of a humour to hold forth on "our blessed Constitution," "our glorious laws," and "our admirable social system." On the contrary, he now found out to his cost that the Constitution—if any there be at all—was the very source whence flowed the barbarous, the atrocious, and the sanguinary laws which in order to prop up the money-interests of a vile social system, awarded the penalty of death to the man who committed a forgery.

Such was the sentence passed upon Emmerson now; and when, after a six hours' trial, during which his counsel had exercised all his eloquence and all his ingenuity to procure an acquittal, the prisoner was found *guilty*, and the judge from the bench pronounced his awful doom, then did the wretched man suddenly feel as if frenzy was seizing upon his brain, and he flung around him a look in which was expressed the direst anguish that the mortal heart could know!

But, ah! what eye encounters his own and suddenly rivets his attention? Standing on a bench behind the thickest of the crowd thronging the Court, stood Theodore Varian. He had not appeared as a witness on the trial because his evidence was not needed, the case being complete enough without his intervention; but he had been all the time a spectator and a listener in the Court—aye, and the most interested of all spectators and all listeners! He had marked every varying expression of Emmerson's countenance—every fluctuating emotion, whether of transitory hope or of utter desperation, that found expression there; and he had gloated over the poignant agonies of that wretched man. Now, too, in that crowning moment when all the first tremendous influence of the death-dooming judgment had fastened upon the prisoner's soul, did Theodore Varian experience the consummation of his infernal joy on meeting the agonising, despairing look, so wildly flung forth from the dock.

The next moment a hand was laid upon Emmerson's shoulder: he started—he turned mechanically—and with a wildering confusion in his brain, stepped out of the dock. It was one of the turnkeys of Newgate who had thus beckoned him away: but Emmerson recollected him not. He now seemed to be walking in a dream—a sort of intoxication in which ineffable horrors haunted him like shadowy phantoms whose reality was involved in misty doubt. There was a droning sound in his brain and a ringing in his ears—his sight appeared to swim—and so strange was the feeling in all his limbs that he could not tell whether or not they were joined on to his body, and whether they moved by his own volition or mechanically of themselves.

In this horrible dreaminess he was led back into Newgate; and there, instead of being taken to the ward in which he had hitherto been in company with others, he was now consigned to a cell in another part of the prison. Chains were put upon him—chains that were fastened to his ankles and round his waist: and then he was left alone. Alone!—no, not alone: for in the thoughts and recollections that came gushing back into his brain, dispelling the clouds which had been hanging around and bringing a horrible clearness with them—Oh! in these fearful memories and anguished reflections there was a hideous companionship! For he was now in a *condemned cell*: he was a doomed man—and his days were numbered!

It may be necessary to remind our readers that up to the period of an accused person's condemnation, he is looked upon as innocent, and can therefore dispose of his property according to his pleasure: but the instant a jury's verdict pronounces him guilty of felony, whatever he possesses instantaneously belongs to the Crown. The day before his trial Emmerson had entrusted all his money to his wife. In various ways—such as the expenses of the spunging-house, the cost of his defence, his family's maintenance, and so forth—he had expended about a hundred and fifty guineas: but he had still seventeen hundred guineas left, and it was exactly this sum which he had confided to Mrs. Emmerson. Into her hands did he give it, because he had not on earth a friend whom he could trust—no, not one: and though he had sore misgivings when making up his mind thus to place his *all* in the possession of a frivolous, extravagant, thoughtless woman, who moreover had no real affection for him,—yet was he compelled to do so. Necessity ruled him, and there was no alternative. At all events, he saw that it was better to incur whatever risk there might be in letting his wife become the guardian of his treasure, than to keep it about his person to be taken possession of by the Sheriff in the name of the Crown.

When seated in his condemned cell, after the trial,—alone, and with the chains upon him,—and when too his mind began to be filled with that horrible clearness which was now so frightfully dispelling all doubts as to the awful reality of his position,—his ideas settled upon that amount of seventeen hundred guineas which he had deposited in his wife's hands. But why did the wretched man suffer his thoughts thus to revert to his gold?—was not every tie that had through life bound him to the attractions of lucre, now severed by the doom which left him for death? No, no—ten

thousand times *no!* While there was life there was hope; and Emmerson, still catching at straws in his drowning agonies, buoyed himself up with the hope that his gold might serve as a means to accomplish his escape. It was a large sum; and were not turnkeys bribeable? To be sure: and suppose that he began by offering five hundred guineas? If this amount would suffice to purchase his safety, he should yet have twelve hundred left wherewith to begin the world anew in another clime. But even supposing that he had to pay a thousand guineas as the bribe for his escape—still there would be seven hundred left for himself; and how much could be done with such an amount! Or even if he had to give every guinea in order to bribe the greedy turnkeys, would it not be better to go forth a beggar—aye, even the veriest beggar upon the face of the earth—so long as he should be enabled to save his life from that fearful engine of death—the gibbet!

In such a strain as this did the wretched man reason to himself throughout the remainder of the dreadful day of his trial. As a matter of course, objection after objection suggested itself to the plan which he had in view; but with that readiness of ingenuity which desperation itself engenders, he disposed of every obstacle which seemed to menace the successful carrying out of his project. Thus did he beguile his imagination into a dream of hope which was not only solacing, but which also became full of confidence: and he lay down to rest in a mood far *less* miserable than thousands out of doors, when thinking of *the man who had that day been sentenced to death*, could possibly imagine him to be.

On the following morning, when the turnkey visited the cell, Emmerson thought it prudent not to delay broaching the subject that was uppermost in his mind. He accordingly made some pleasant remark by way of opening a conversation: but

when he received a short and almost brutal answer, and then observed that the turnkey's countenance was very far from wearing an encouraging expression, his heart suddenly sank within him, and the words he would have uttered initiatory of the cherished plan, died upon his lips.

"Now then, sir, if you choose to be shaved," said the turnkey, "the barber is going his round, and he shall come to you."

Emmerson was about to answer in the negative: for why should he—a doomed man, and with spirits so suddenly damped into utter hopelessness—trouble himself any more in this life about his personal appearance? But just at the very instant that this negative response was about to fall from his tongue, it suddenly struck him that perhaps the barber might appear more complaisant and wear a more hopeful countenance than the turnkey. He accordingly said "Yes:" and in a few minutes the barber was introduced.

When Emmerson found himself alone with this individual, in the condemned cell where they were left together by the turnkey, he surveyed him not merely with attention, but with an earnest scrutiny. He saw, then, before him a man of about six or seven-and-twenty—thin, pale, and with the marks of dissipation on his features: there was also a certain sinister expression on that countenance, which seemed actually encouraging to the purpose Emmerson had in view. As for the barber himself, he of course saw that he was the object of this survey, but did not appear to take any special notice of it—doubtless fancying that it might arise from the morbid mood or disturbed humour of a wretched being condemned to death.

"So you are the prison-barber?" said Emmerson, with his eyes still rivetted on the man.

"I am, sir—just for the present," was the reply; "the regular one being ill."

"Ah! then you are not the regular one?" said Emmerson, inquiringly. "How long have you acted in this capacity within these walls?"

"About six weeks," was the man's answer, as he prepared his shaving-tackle.

"And are you likely to continue visiting the prison much longer?"

"Well, I should say I am, sir: for the regular barber don't seem to be getting well."

"In that case, then, you must come and shave me," said Emmerson, "every morning until ——"

And he stopped suddenly short, as a man pauses in horror upon the brink of a precipice which he suddenly reaches.

"I shall be very happy, sir, was the barber's observation; "and I am sure I am very sorry to see a gentleman of your standing in such——"

"Enough!" said Emmerson, not sternly, but convulsively with horror. "What is your name?" he demanded quickly.

"Richard Melmoth—*Dick* they call me, sir. But I ain't a master-barber on my own account: I live with Mr. Coffin, who ——"

And then *he* also stopped short in sudden confusion: for he instantaneously perceived that he had just mentioned a name which might be already too well known to the doomed man.

"Coffin!" echoed the latter with another strong shudder convulsing him from head to foot as he sat in his chair, so that the very chains clanked upon his legs with the powerful writhing of his limbs: "is not he the——the——You know what I mean?"

"Well, he *is*, sir," responded Dick Melmoth: "but I am sure I beg pardon for having hinted at anything unpleasant."

"No matter—no matter, my good fellow," said Emmerson, with the quickness of nervous excitement. "Your master, Coffin ——You said he was your master, I think?"

"Yes, sir, Dan'el Coffin is my master, and a tidy sort of a person he is, notwithstanding his name isn't a very good one."

"Ah! no matter the name," interrupted Emmerson, catching greedily at what he saw encouraging in Dick Melmoth's remark. "You say that your master, Daniel Coffin, is a good kind of a man? Well, and if I mistake not, *you* also are a good kind of a person. You would rather do a fellow-creature a service than an injury?——Yes—yes—I know you would——I read it in your countenance. Especially," added Emmerson, his voice sinking to a low whisper and his look assuming an expression of deep and excited meaning—"if you were to be well paid for any such service rendered?"

Dick Melmoth now regarded the doomed man with mingled astonishment and mistrust: for it struck him that the awful sense of his position might have touched his brain. But perceiving naught indicative of mental alienation in his look, Melmoth assumed a cunning air, and whispered, "There's nothing that Dan'el Coffin would not do for money."

"Tell him, then—tell him," said Emmerson, with feverish eagerness, "that I will give him five hundred guineas—yes—five hundred good golden guineas if he will assist me to escape from this dreadful place!"

"Ah! have you really that hope, then?" said Dick Melmoth.

"Hope! Yes—to be sure I have hope!" returned Emmerson sharply. "It is impossible I can die so soon! No—no—it is impossible! Consider, five hundred guineas—and if that is not enough —— But it is a large sum—a very large sum—and a great deal can be done with it. Tell Mr. Coffin all that I say."

"Well, sir, I will—and to-morrow morning when I come in I will let you know what his answer is. But you had better let me shave you now as soon as possible; for the turnkey will be coming back in a minute to let me out of the cell, and he will think it odd if I have not even begun to put the brush to your face."

Emmerson accordingly submitted himself to the process of shaving; and by the time it was over, the turnkey made his appearance to let the barber out.

As hour after hour now passed away, Emmerson continued to yield himself up to the wildest hopes: and yet his exterior was composed and tranquil as he sat in the solitude of his cell giving way to these sanguine visions. He resembled the Teriaki, or oriental opium-eater, who without moving from his seat, and with an unruffled and unvarying equanimity of countenance, launches himself on the sunny ocean of his excited imaginings—visits in fancy the most delicious climates of the world—revels in every joy—partakes in every pleasure—and not merely forgets every source of

earthly uneasiness, but conjures up ten thousand causes of elysian bliss.

In a similarly dreamy state did Emmerson while away the time. His character seemed to be altogether changed by his misfortunes. Once eminently practical in all his pursuits, he was now a mere visionary: but then it was so necessary *now* to cheat the mind of its sources of terror, lull the soul into confidence, and conjure up the delusions of hope to displace the dark realities of despair!

The chaplain visited the cell; and then Emmerson, awakening from his dream, listened attentively to all that the reverend gentleman had to say. For Emmerson had always been a hypocrite with regard to religion; and it suited him to be more so now, so that he might appear to have renounced every thought for this life and thus lull asleep all suspicion respecting his hope of escape. The chaplain passed an hour with him, and then withdrew in the belief that the condemned man was very penitent and in a most admirable state of mind, considering all things. Therefore, in consequence of the reverend gentleman's report, it was deemed totally unnecessary to place anybody in the condemned cell to keep watch upon Emmerson. Indeed such was not the custom at the time of which we are writing, save in those cases where there was positive ground for apprehending an attempt at suicide.

The day was slipping away, and Emmerson began to wonder that his wife and daughter had not been to see him. Previous to the trial he had enjoined them not to be in the Court; and the result was borne to them by the attorney who had conducted his defence. That they had not visited him during the first few hours which succeeded the terrible sentence, was not surprising: for little as was the affection subsisting between the husband and wife, yet at all events the feelings of the daughter towards the father were a little more tender—and it might be well supposed that Miss Emmerson was fearfully shocked at her sire's awful position. But why, after having had the benefit of an entire night to compose their minds somewhat, his wife and daughter should not visit him during the day that was now passing, he could not conjecture. He began to be alarmed lest they meant to leave him unsolaced to meet his doom, while they squandered away the money entrusted to their keeping. But while he was beginning to give way to these apprehensions, the door of the cell was opened; and two ladies, dressed in deep mourning of a very handsome description, were ushered in. Their veils were down—and for a moment Emmerson was in doubt whether his suspicion as to who they were was correct or not. But all doubt was speedily dissipated when they raised their veils and threw themselves into his arms, sobbing and crying in a manner which was afterwards represented in the newspapers as "most agonizing."

But the moment the turnkey had withdrawn, Emmerson disengaged himself from the embrace of his wife and daughter; and glancing sternly from one to the other, he said, "What is the meaning of this?"

"Oh! my dear, dear husband," sobbed Mrs. Emmerson; "how can you ask us such a question? Arabella and me would have been here earlier to-day, but we could not get our mourning sent home before. I gave orders for it the instant I heard the dreadful news yesterday; and the milliner sat up all night to make it. We thought it was but decent and proper to wait till it was ready before we came to see you——"

"Nonsense—ridiculous!" ejaculated Emmerson, actually forgetting for the moment all the horrors of his position in the rage that he felt at the conduct of his wife and daughter in thus visiting him in the pomp of new mourning. "Do you know that this proceeding on your part has been dictated by a heartless vanity, and not by a genuine grief? Ah! there is gaiety even in your very mourning—there is finery in these weeds which you have assumed! You treat me as if I were already dead——"

Here Arabella threw herself with no affected outburst of grief into her father's arms, and besought him to pardon her if she had in any way done wrong; but amidst rending sobs she gaspingly declared that whatever she *had* done, was at her mother's suggestion.

"Well, we will say no more about it," said Emmerson, disengaging himself from his daughter's embrace—for he was a man who disliked all huggings and kissings from those who were nearest and ought to have been dearest to him. "You have got that money safe?" he asked, turning abruptly towards his wife.

"Yes—to be sure—all except what we have laid out:"—and she glanced down at her mourning garb and then at that of her daughter.

"Now, understand me," said Emmerson, speaking in a low but decisive tone and with a look profoundly serious. "All hope has not abandoned me: indeed, I am confident of being enabled to escape. Now don't be foolish, Arabella—we shall be overheard," he said, suddenly turning towards his daughter, who gave vent to a paroxysm of unfeigned joy at the tidings which had just met her ears. "But all depends," he continued, again speaking to his wife, "upon your keeping that money safe until the moment it is wanted to pay those who will assist in my escape."

"Depend upon it," answered Mrs. Emmerson, "that it is as safe with me as if in the Bank of England."

We need not dwell any longer upon this interview, which lasted but little more than half-an-hour: for so soon as Emmerson had assured himself that the money was really safe in his wife's keeping, he rather wished that she and Arabella would take their departure, so that he might once more give way to that opiate lull in which he had during the early part of the day steeped his senses.

On the following morning Emmerson awaited Dick Melmoth's arrival with the most acute suspense. In due course the turnkey made his appearance to inquire if Emmerson would have the barber; and with such greedy haste did the condemned man reply in the affirmative, that the prison-functionary, evidently struck by his manner, could not help eyeing him suspiciously for a moment.

"Ah! it is such a relief," immediately exclaimed Emmerson, recovering his presence of mind, "to have some one to talk to, if only for a few minutes!"

This remark at once satisfied the turnkey, who perhaps would even have been satisfied without it: for he had been long enough employed within those prison-walls to know that condemned men were but too likely to say and do strange things.

Once more alone with Dick Melmoth, Emmerson immediately saw by his manner that the proposal had been entertained: and his heart dilated within him.

"Well—what does your master say? has he agreed? will he accept——"

"He will do it," answered Dick Melmoth; "but not under a thousand."

"A thousand!" ejaculated Emmerson: "that is enormous!"

"Aye—and Coffin says that it is a precious risk to run," replied Dick. "Remember it's no joke to help a man out of such a hobble as this: and if so be he was caught——"

"But he will undertake it?" asked Emmerson nervously.

"He will," rejoined Dick Melmoth. "But what earnest can you give him that the money will be forthcoming when the work is done?"

"I have the money——"

"You!—here?" ejaculated Melmoth. "Why, if the Sheriff knew it, he would take every farthing away from you in a jiffey."

"I do not mean here," returned Emmerson. "My wife has got the money—or can get it—a friend will let her have it when the time comes——"

"Ah! but suppose he shouldn't?" said Melmoth.

"But I know that he *will*," returned Emmerson positively.

"But Mr. Coffin don't know it, you see—and he won't move a peg till he sees that there's no mistake about the blunt."

"Well then," said Emmerson, perceiving that it was necessary to be explicit, "my wife has got the money already; and if you like, your master Mr. Coffin can go and see it at her lodgings."

"Well and good," observed Dick Melmoth: "this looks like business. Where is the lady's lodging?"

"In Fetter Lane:"—and Emmerson named the number of the house where his wife and daughter were dwelling. "They will visit me in the course of the day—I will tell them that a person may probably call upon them this evening in order to see that they really possess the sum we have named. Will that arrangement do?"

"Yes—perfectly," replied Melmoth. "Mr. Coffin has left the business to me to manage, because he himself can't very well come and see you on account of its not being usual for *him* to visit persons in your situation."

"I understand you," said Emmerson with a ghastly look: for he knew that the allusion was meant to Coffin in his capacity of public executioner. "But the plan of my escape—the means—the arrangements——"

"I will tell you more to-morrow morning," interrupted Dick Melmoth. "We must not converse too long now."

He then proceeded to exercise his tonsorial functions upon Mr. Emmerson, and by the time he had done, the turnkey came back to give him egress from the cell. Emmerson was now once more alone, and he proceeded to reflect upon all that had just taken place. But his reverie was presently interrupted by the entrance of the chaplain; and again did the condemned man conduct himself in a way which induced the reverend gentleman to think most favourably of his state of mind.

Sood after mid-day Mrs. and Miss Emmerson again made their appearance: and Emmerson, after explaining to them the nature of the visit they were to expect in the evening, addressed his wife in the ensuing terms:—

"Now remember, you will show the person that calls—whoever he may be—one thousand guineas and no more. If he asks whether you possess *more*, you will give an emphatic reply in the negative. And be careful that he *sees* the money only, and *touches* it not: for I am dealing with unscrupulous characters—necessarily so in the position wherein I am placed. I need not tell you that it is *my life* which has to be saved—my life which to a certain extent will be in your hands on this occasion!"

Mrs. Emmerson promised faithful compliance with her husband's instructions; and Arabella was so much affected she went into hysterics. Mr. Emmerson hated "a scene," especially as he wished to avoid every thing tending to dispirit himself; and he therefore was well pleased when his wife and daughter took their departure. He then remained once more alone to pursue his reflections and abandon himself to that condition of dreamy hopefulness which, as we before stated, had the effect of an opiate to lull him into tranquillity and security.

CHAPTER CLXVI.

THE PRETENDED FRIEND.

THEODORE VARIAN had not in the meantime experienced any diminution of that fearful interest which he felt in the fate of his victim—an interest of no compassionating kind, but the aim of which was to ensure the dread catastrophe beyond the intervention of anything to prevent it. He had therefore, on the preceding day and on that of which we are now writing, lurked about the exterior of Newgate—watching whether any of Emmerson's former friends came to visit the prison: for it struck him that the unhappy man might endeavour to obtain the interest of some towards procuring a pardon. Having been a prisoner there himself, Theodore was acquainted with the turnkeys; and by means of a little bribery and a little treating at the adjacent public-house, he ascertained the *seeming* condition of the man's mind, That is to say, he was told that Emmerson bore himself tranquilly and with apparent resignation, and that no persons from out-of-doors save his wife and daughter had been admitted to see him.

Theodore Varian knew all the *ins* and *outs* of Emmerson's character so well as to be fully aware that anything like resignation on his part could be merely a hypocritical assumption; and he therefore came to the conclusion that the doomed man had yet some hope on which he relied, or some project which he was working out. But Varian was determined that hope and project alike should fail, what-

ever they might be; for in the implacability of his vengeance he resolved to hunt his mortal enemy to the scaffold, and only rest when he beheld him hanging lifeless there!

While pondering upon the position of affairs, it struck Theodore that he would call upon the barber who usually attended in the prison—ascertain if he had performed his functions upon Emmerson—and if so, whether he also believed him to be in a resigned and tranquil condition. But on proceeding to the barber's house in the Old Bailey, Theodore learnt that the object of his inquiry had been ill for some time, and that he had temporarily delegated his monopoly of beards within Newgate walls to one Richard Melmoth belonging to another barber's shop, in Fleet Lane. Thither did Varian accordingly repair: and on observing the name of COFFIN over the door, he at once knew that this was the abode of the Public Executioner.

It was in the afternoon when Theodore entered the Hangman's shop; and taking off his hat, he bade the young man who was in attendance proceed to cut his hair. This was none other than Dick Melmoth himself, who, placing a chair for his customer, commenced the operation forthwith.

"So they have found the City bill-broker guilty of the forgery," said Varian, as if in a casual manner.

"Yes," answered Dick Melmoth. "I saw him this morning."

"Did you indeed!" cried Theodore, suddenly showing an interest in the topic of conversation.

"To be sure—and yesterday morning also," replied Melmoth. "The fact is, I attend in there to shave the prisoners, the regular barber being ill."

"And how does Emmerson bear himself?" asked Theodore.

"Well, pretty comfortably, all things considering," answered Melmoth.

"Do you mean to say that he has any hope of a reprieve?"

"Lor' bless you, sir—everybody has a hope till the last; and I don't think Mr. Emmerson is different from the rest."

There was now a brief pause, during which Theodore Varian reflected profoundly.

"Is he communicative at all with you?" he at length asked.

"Why—what do you mean?" demanded Dick Melmoth.

"I mean," returned Theodore, looking up in a significant manner towards Melmoth's countenance, "that if you would do something for me, I will pay you handsomely."

"Well, that's English at all events," said Melmoth. "But what do you want me to do?—and what do you mean by handsome payment?"

"Can we have a little conversation together without fear of interruption?" asked Theodore. "This shop is very public, and we may be overheard."

"Well then," said a growling savage kind of voice; "step in here, and we will talk the matter over."

Theodore started, even to the risk of having the scissors thrust into his eyes, as that voice, coming from behind, struck his ear; and on looking round, he beheld a most repulsive individual, standing on the threshold of the door opening into the little parlour behind the shop—for the Hangman had been attentively listening all the while to the preceding colloquy between Dick Melmoth and the customer.

Accordingly, a finishing stroke being given to the hair-clipping operation, Theodore passed into the back room, where the Hangman bade him sit down,—saying, "I see you have a little business in hand, and we will talk it over quietly. I suppose you know who I am; and if not, I'll act as my own master of the ceremonies and introduce myself as Mr. Dan'el Coffin. This chap here is my assistant," he added, pointing to Melmoth;" and so we can talk before him. Come, shut the door, Dick, and sit down along with us."

"You doubtless overheard what I was saying to your assistant," observed Varian, conquering the mingled repugnance and terror which he for a moment felt on finding himself in the company of that dreadful man, who, as he had learnt from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, was a principal actor in the memorable scenes at the hut near Shooter's Hill.

"To be sure," exclaimed the Hangman. "The moment I heard you beginning to talk serious to Dick Melmoth here, I began to listen very attentive indeed. It's my way, because I never let a chance escape."

"Well, well, Mr. Coffin," said Theodore; "we have come together, and need not discuss how it has been brought about. The fact is I am a very dear and intimate friend of Mr. Emmerson——"

"Ah! then you came to my shop just now with an intention," interrupted the Hangman, "and not in a promiscuous manner?"

"No—not in an accidental manner," rejoined Varian. "I learnt from the regular prison barber that you—or rather your man here—had got the custom of the place; and so I came to see you. The fact is, as I have just now said, I am an intimate friend of Emmerson's: but I dare not openly display the deep interest I feel in him. You will excuse me for declining to enter into particulars? Suffice it to say that whatever I do in this matter is entirely of a private nature: I must not be seen in it—I must not be known in it. Emmerson himself must not even be suffered to learn that any effort at all is being made in his behalf——at least not until its result be known: for it were useless to buoy him up with hope unless it is certain to be fulfilled."

"Well then, what do you propose?—and how can we help you in any way?" demanded the Hangman, who did not exactly see what Theodore was driving at, or appeared to be driving at.

"Your assistant here, Mr. Coffin, has access to Mr. Emmerson," continued Theodore. "Could he not glean from the unhappy man whether, if the means of escape were put within his reach, he would avail himself of them?"

"Yes—this *can* be done fast enough," said the Hangman, exchanging a rapid glance of significancy with Dick Melmoth—but not so rapid as to escape Theodore's observation. "Well then, suppose what you have suggested is done—what next?"

"Having first ascertained whether Emmerson would avail himself of the means of escape if placed within his power," continued Theodore, "it would follow as a matter of course to see whether such means could by any possibility be afforded."

"Well—and you would enter into it all—and you would pay for it?" asked the Hangman, with another quick glance towards Dick Melmoth.

"If I were not prepared to do so, I should not be here this moment," said Theodore. "As for my readiness to be the secret mover in any stratagem that may ensure my unfortunate friend's escape from an ignominious death, I have sought you out for the purpose: and as for my means of remunerating you, behold!"—and with these words Theodore displayed a number of bank-notes, which he took from a pocket-book, and for the possession of which he was indebted to the bounty of his kind benefactor Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

"Come, all this is business-like enough," said the Hangman. "But you say you don't wish to appear in the matter?"

"No: my avocations—my station in life—my connexions—everything, prevent me from taking any overt part in this proceeding. Indeed I would not have it mentioned *until the very last* to Emmerson himself that I *am* engaged in whatsoever plan may be set on foot for his deliverance. I shall not even tell you my name—or who I am—nor aught concerning me: and if any undue curiosity be manifested with a view to discover who I am, I shall at once abandon the affair and have nothing more to do with it."

Wary, cunning, and astute as the reader knows the Hangman to be, he was gradually thrown off his guard by this language so specious, so plausible. Indeed, it appeared natural enough that an influential person, of good standing in society, should keep himself completely in the back-ground while setting afoot a project of the kind hinted at: and that Varian *was* a young gentleman of the utmost respectability, both the Hangman and Dick Melmoth readily believed from his personal appearance. Moreover, the sight of the bank-notes had produced a marvellous effect upon Mr. Coffin's credulity, touching his weakest point and working on his most delicate susceptibility. He accordingly resolved, after exchanging another significant look with Dick Melmoth, to give the present business a shape and substantiality at once, by confiding to Theodore everything that was already in contemplation.

"Well, sir, I see that you are one of the right sort," he accordingly began; "and so we can soon come to an understanding with each other. In the first place, you want to know whether your unfortunate friend Mr. Emmerson would avail himself of the means of escape if they were placed in his way? This is what you want to know: and I can give you the information at once, without making you wait a single hour—much less a whole day—to acquire it. As for what the information is worth, I must leave that to your generosity."

"Fifty guineas by way of a commencement," said Theodore, inwardly rejoicing at the success of the tact he had displayed in thus drawing out the Hangman: for he saw that he was about to learn something of real importance.

"Thank'ee, sir," said Daniel Coffin, as he took up the bank-notes which Theodore flung across the table. "Now then, I can tell you," he proceeded with a knowing look upon his hang-dog countenance, "that not only is Mr. Emmerson ready to avail himself of any means of escape which may be presented to him, but he and my man Dick Melmoth here have already had a little talk on the subject."

"Ah! this is indeed good news," exclaimed Theodore, with a well-assumed look of the most genuine joy. "Poor Emmerson! he has been a dear and valued friend to me; and I would make many, many sacrifices to save him from so dreadful a death. Tell me—tell me, my good friends," he continued, with every appearance of the most heart-felt feeling, "whether there be really a chance—a hope—even the slightest prospect, of accomplishing his rescue?"

"Where there's a will there's a way," answered Coffin; "and although the walls of Newgate are very thick and very high—the bars very massive—the watch very vigilant—and the chains on one's legs uncommon awkward—yet all these obstacles *may* be got over when Dan'el Coffin chooses to set his wits to work."

"Ah! now you encourage the most sanguine hope within me!" cried Theodore, seizing the Hangman's hand and pressing it with an appearance of the most genuine fervour. "Tell me what your plans are—explain to me what is already done—and whatever reward has been already promised you, I will double it! Yes," added Theodore, with strong emphasis, "I will double it—no matter how large the amount!"

The Hangman threw upon Dick Melmoth a look of gloating satisfaction at this magnificent promise; and reverting his eyes towards Varian, he said, "You are very liberal, sir—very generous indeed: but take care you don't talk rather too fast when you speak about doubling the reward."

"I tell you that what I said was deliberately uttered," rejoined Theodore, "and was no vain idle boast. Come—tell me at once what is the amount of the reward promised you?"

"A thousand guineas," returned the Hangman, intently watching Varian's countenance, so as to ascertain the nature of the impression made by this announcement.

"A thousand guineas!—it is a large sum," said Theodore, slowly, and apparently in a musing mood: "but still I shall not fly from my word. How and when is this money to be paid?—for I may as well fulfil my promise at the same time."

"Well, you are indeed an out-and-out friend to Mr. Emmerson," observed the Hangman, thinking it necessary to flatter his generous visitor with a compliment. "To tell you the truth, then, Mrs. Emmerson is going to convince us to-night that the money *is* ready. She has got it—or will have it—at her lodgings: so I shall just toddle down to Fetter Lane between nine and ten to-night to convince myself that the cash is there; and if you like, sir, to make an appointment with me at about the same time, any where you choose, you might take the opportunity of proving that *your* money will be forthcoming also. Besides, as I mean to ask Mrs. Emmerson for a few hundreds on account, perhaps you would not mind——"

"Certainly not! I understand you well," exclaimed Varian, with so much apparent frankness and cordial willingness of manner that never in all his life had Daniel Coffin been so completely thrown off his guard. "I will call upon you here at ten o'clock to-night, and bring you a few hundreds on account. But observe—not a single

syllable to any one!" he added, rising from his seat as he spoke.

"Mum's the word, sir," rejoined Daniel Coffin. "I always keep secrets as close as wax."

Theodore Varian then took his departure, leaving the Hangman and Dick Melmoth to chuckle over the lucrative job they appeared to have in hand, and congratulate themselves on the prospect of clearing a couple of thousand guineas in a very short space of time.

The reader could not have experienced any difficulty in penetrating Varian's object throughout the preceding interview with Coffin and his assistant. From the moment that the conversation in the shop first took a turn that promised to become interesting and confidential, Varian's aim was to ascertain whether Emmerson *was* buoyed up with any particular hope; and if so, *what* its nature might be. By pretending to be the doomed man's friend, it not only seemed natural enough that he should be taking an interest in his predicament, but it likewise was the best method of inviting any confidential communication. In all this, then, had Theodore fully succeeded; and it now only remained for him to frustrate the plan and annihilate the hope.

CHAPTER CLXVII.

THE RESULT.

An almost sleepless night did Emmerson pass: for he was now tortured with a thousand anxieties relative to the success of the schemes that were in progress for his deliverance from the scaffold. Though hope was certainly uppermost in his mind, yet he could not any longer lull himself into that dreaminess which had heretofore soothed him for so many hours at a time. No—for his imagination suggested many, many sources of alarm and uneasiness that agitated in his mind, along with the hope, which, though maintaining the ascendancy, was not powerful enough to extinguish every militating feeling altogether. What if any accident should happen to the money? Everything depended upon the safety of that gold which was to prove the key of his deliverance.

He wished that he had asked his wife where she kept it—whether in a cupboard or in a trunk—and whether she carried the key in her pocket when she went out? Then he feared lest Daniel Coffin should strive to possess himself of the money without the intention of doing his work for it. Next he asked himself over and over again how the escape was to be effected, supposing that all was right with the money, and that Coffin proved faithful to his agreement? For when Emmerson thought of the tremendous massive walls, which enclosed him as it were in a living tomb—the other walls equally impregnable that lay between his own cell and the open street—the enormous bars that grated the windows—the numbers of persons always about during the day in every part of the prison—and the careful watch which he knew full well was kept by night,—when, we say, he thought of all these things, he beheld so many insuperable barriers between himself and freedom, that he almost grew wild with horror and affright. But the next moment the whisperings of hope would remind him that men *had* escaped from Newgate on various occasions; and however desperate and daring their exploits might have been, he was prepared to act as desperately and daringly in his own behalf. Besides, who could tell what schemes Daniel Coffin might suggest—what opportunities he might find for smoothing down difficulties—and what bold conception he might initiate so as to lead to the fullest success?

Such is a brief outline of the conflicting thoughts which agitated in Emmerson's brain throughout the greater portion of the night, and made him toss, and heave, and roll, and writhe, and convulse, and clasp his hands, and press them to his throbbing brows—in fact, that whirled him through every possible phase of the heart's most potent feelings as he lay on the hard pallet in his gloomy cell. For a few brief intervals an uneasy slumber crept upon him: but on each occasion he woke up with a sudden start—pursued even into wakefulness by some horrible phantom that had haunted his temporary sleep. Or he would perhaps find himself sitting up in the bed, trembling all over with a strong agony—bathed in a profuse perspiration, cold and clammy as that of death—with the feeling, too, that his hair was standing right out as it were from his head. In this manner—between conflicting thoughts and brief intervals of fevered slumber—did Emmerson pass the live-long night.

Although it was now the beginning of the month of June, yet dull and misty broke the morning into the condemned cell—penetrating thither indeed with a hesitating, struggling uncertainty, much later than it had dawned upon the world without; for the windows of the cell were small, darkened with the massive bars, and not looking into one of the yards, but upon an obscure corridor into which the light had to struggle first, ere it penetrated more feebly still into the dungeon. The weather was exceedingly cold, too, for the time of year: and Emmerson shivered from head to foot as he rose from the pallet. His teeth chattered—he was nervous and uneasy—and he felt that if the slightest circumstance should occur to damp his only hope, his courage—such as it was in its unnatural bracing-up—would give way altogether.

It wanted an hour to the usual time of Dick Melmoth's arrival. An hour—oh! what a long weary interval of excruciating suspense! If the idler, the debauchee, and the dissipated only knew what a world of feeling may be summed up in a single hour—how much of torturing agony may be condensed into that space—they would learn the importance of time and the value of each of those many, many hours which they waste in worthless, bad, or frivolous pursuits!

At length the well-known tread of the turnkey, accompanied by the clanking sound of the keys along the stone corridor, reached Emmerson's ears. It would be impossible to describe the feeling which now seized upon him—a feeling in which all the most powerful sentiments were strangely, wildly, and terribly blended,—burning hope and chilling dread—a devouring anxiety to receive the first look or word from Melmoth that should relieve him from suspense—and a fearful clinging even to this very suspense, lest certainty itself should become the horror of despair!

The key grated in the lock—the huge bolts were drawn back—and the stout burly form of the prison-functionary appeared on the threshold.

"Will you have the barber this morning, sir?" asked the man.

"Yes, yes—to be sure!" was the response given with a nervousness that was rather felt than shown.

"Now then, Dick," cried the turnkey: and Melmoth advanced along the passage.

The next moment he passed into the cell; and as the door closed behind him, he gave a slight but ominous shake of the head, in mute answer to the devouring, agonizing, beseeching regard which Emmerson fixed upon him.

As if a thunderbolt had stricken the wretched man he fell back, and tumbled with the helpless weight of a corpse upon the bed which was immediately behind him. Dick Melmoth was frightened, and hastened to raise him: but for an instant did the young man recoil in horror—for never, never, in his life, had he beheld a countenance so ghastly, so perfectly hideous in its strong expression of awful feeling, as that which now looked up into his own. No—nor did Melmoth believe it possible that the human visage *could* in a moment become so distorted—so convulsed with horribie workings—or that it could be made so fearfully faithful an index of the direst tortures that ever harrowed the human heart.

Slowly raising himself to a sitting-posture on the side of the bed, Emmerson gazed up at Melmoth and endeavoured to frame some question that rose to his lips: but his tongue refused to give utterance to the words he sought to speak, and he sat vainly gasping—a piteous, wretched, miserable spectacle of abject humanity, with a crushed and broken spirit!

"It's all dicky with money and everything else—unless something should turn out to be better than we suspect," began Melmoth, not giving himself much trouble to break the intelligence in a delicate way.

"What—what do you mean?" asked Emmerson, just able to gasp forth these words.

"Why, I mean that the Sheriff sent yesterday afternoon to your wife's lodgings and took all the money," answered Dick. "Sixteen or seventeen hundred guineas, I think I heard it was."

"O God! O God!" groaned Emmerson, in the bitterness of despair: and bowing his head upon his hands while his elbows rested on his knees, he became convulsed with grief.

But all of a sudden it struck him that the interview with the barber must necessarily be short, and that he should at least make the best of it so as to ascertain his exact position. Recovering therefore some degree of composure, he bade Melmoth tell him everything that had taken place.

"Well, you see, sir," returned Dick, "last night, at a little after nine o'clock, me and Mr. Coffin toddled down to Fetter Lane, and on arriving at the house, were shown up to your lady's apartment. But, lo and behold! there was Mrs. Emmerson and your daughter a-sitting one on one side of the room and one on t'other—both rocking themselves to and fro, and moaning, and crying, and going on at such a rate that me and Mr. Coffin was quite taken aback. We stated our business; and then your good lady told us how the Sheriffs' officers had been and made a search in consequence of some secret information they had got—and how they took away every farthing except fifty guineas, which by the Sheriffs' order was left for the use of the ladies. So, finding that there was no money forthcoming, and not being a lady's man at all—I mean in offering sympathy and all that kind of thing—Mr. Coffin took himself home again, I of course going with him."

"But good heaven!" cried Emmerson in the wildness of his despair: "who could have given the information? Surely, surely, my mortal enemy—he who has hunted me to the very death—is not persecuting me still?"

"You don't happen to know whether it's likely that any friend is interesting himself in your behalf?" inquired Dick Melmoth.

"Friend!" repeated Emmerson, with almost maniac bitterness: "friend! Good heavens! do I look like a man who possesses a friend?"

"Well then, I had better put the question point blank," said Melmoth: "do you know a young gentleman—about five-and-twenty I should say—tall, nice-looking, slender, very neatly dressed—linen beautifully clean—fine eyes too I noticed, and a very good set of teeth——"

"Why! you are describing my mortal enemy, Theodore Varian!" almost shrieked forth Emmerson, springing from the bed with a suddenness that made his fetters clank loudly and even hurt his limbs by the motion.

"Ah! then it *was* a damnable treachery after all," exclaimed Dick Melmoth: "and Coffin more than suspected it when we found he did not come last night according to his appointment——"

"What on earth do you mean?—to what are you alluding?" demanded the wretched man, in the cruellest suspense: "tell me what has occurred."

"Why, yesterday in the middle of the day, this young gentleman comes in such a cajoling fashion—gets me into conversation—then gets the upper hand of Dan'el himself—professes so much friendship for you—promises so many liberal things—and in short worms himself so completely into our confidence, that Mr. Coffin tells him everything, even to the fact of the money being at your good lady's lodgings——"

"Oh! accured idiots that you were!"—and the words hissed reptile-like between Emmerson's teeth, while his eyes glared with frenzied malignity upon Dick Melmoth, who recoiled from him in horror. "You have ruined me!—you have sealed my doom, you and your accursed master! Oh! it is clear as daylight now—too clear, too clear! Theodore Varian pursues me still—he is determined to hunt me to the gallows—it is he who gave the information to the Sheriff——My God, my God!"

And again the wretched man fell backward upon the hard pallet, with his hands pressed violently against his throbbing brows. There he lay, writhing and convulsing like a stricken snake,—giving vent to the most piteous lamentations, mingled with the bitterest complainings and the most fearful curses. In truth, it was an awful spectacle: and if Dick Melmoth's heart was too much steeled against the kind sympathies of human nature to experience any real commiseration for the unhappy man, he was at all events shocked and horrified at the appalling nature of his anguish and despair. The paroxysm of almost mortal

agony lasted for several minutes; and then Melmoth ventured to remind the doomed criminal that the turnkey would speedily be coming back.

"Ah! wretch that I am," he exclaimed, springing up once more from the pallet as suddenly as if galvanized: "every ground of hope is slipping away from beneath my feet, even as the drop itself shall glide away from under me when the last tremendous moment comes! But tell me—tell me—is all lost? Do you mean to abandon me to my fate? My God! you cannot have the hearts—you and Mr. Coffin—to do it! Remember, it is through you—your folly—your indiscretion—that I am deprived of the means of paying you——"

"Don't you think that it's possible for you to get a thousand guineas anywhere else?" asked Dick Melmoth.

"No—nor a thousand pence!" cried Emmerson, wringing his hands in despair, while his distorted features, ashy lips, gleaming eyes, and corrugating brows, rendered his countenance absolutely awful: for it seemed as if there were not a nerve, nor a tendon, nor a fibre in that man's frame that did not vibrate to the touch of the heart's strong agony—not a pulse in his whole body that did not beat in sympathy with the maddening excruciation of his soul—not a vein nor an artery in which the blood did not course with the velocity of lightning and with the torturing sensation as if that blood were molten lead.

"Then you have really no hope?" said Melmoth inquiringly.

"Hope! yes, in you and your master—for you cannot abandon me now!"

"But the risk that is to be run—who is to pay us for *that?*"

"Risk!" cried Emmerson. "But do I not run a risk also?"

"Yes—but *you* are sentenced to be hanged," re-

joined Melmoth with more truth than delicacy; "while me and Coffin are not!"

Emmerson was petrified all in a moment by this answer. The workings of his countenance suddenly ceased, its ghastliness of expression becoming fixed and stereotyped on his features, but without moveability, while he gazed upon Dick Melmoth in mingled horror and consternation.

In the middle of this strange scene the approaching steps of the gaol functionary, and the clanking of his keys along the stone corridor without, met the ears of Emmerson and Melmoth.

"Heavens, he comes!" suddenly whispered the former: "and nothing is decided!"

"No—there is nothing to decide *now*," replied Dick. "Come, sit down—make haste—and let me shave you!"

"No, no—not for worlds could I settle myself to anything!" exclaimed Emmerson, now seized with another paroxysm of wild excruciating anguish: and again did he toss himself upon the bed, where he lay writhing fearfully as the turnkey entered the cell.

"He's not in a state of mind to be shaved this morning," said Dick Melmoth, in a whisper to that functionary. "The fit took him the moment after you locked us in together, and it's lasted ever since. I don't think he's in his right mind."

"Well then, we must send the doctor to him," remarked the turnkey coolly.

Thereupon Dick Melmoth quitted the condemned cell; and shortly afterwards, when Emmerson regained some degree of composure, he found the prison chaplain and surgeon by his bedside.

CHAPTER CLXVIII.

THE LAST HOPE.

THE miserable man gazed for some time upon the two gentlemen without recognizing them, although he had seen them both several times since his incarceration in Newgate: but as the paroxysm of his ineffable anguish subsided, he felt stunned and stupified by the consternation which succeeded. In his soul there was a profound sense of the ruin of every hope; while the vista of his confused and darkling ideas was closed by the ominous looming of a gibbet. Vacantly, then, did he gaze upon the chaplain and the surgeon; and his eyes seemed to denote a sort of palsy of the brain.

The chaplain began to speak, enjoining the wretched man to tranquillize himself; while the surgeon felt his pulse and nodded encouragingly to the reverend Ordinary, as much as to imply that he would soon recover his mental equilibrium. And it was so. Gradually did Emmerson's ideas settle themselves in his brain; and he began to understand the words that were addressed to him. On thus recognizing the chaplain and the surgeon, he felt an instinctive necessity of exercising control over himself: and while pondering this idea in his mind, the thought struck him that if he did not do so, he would most likely have a turnkey set to watch him—in which case, farewell to every hope of escaping from that dreadful place!

Recovering his composure, then, he began to talk rationally—observing that it was a sudden and overpowering paroxysm of feeling which had seized upon him, but that the holy words of the Chaplain had now poured solace down into his soul.

The reverend gentleman and the surgeon shortly after quitted the doomed man, who accordingly once more remained alone in his dungeon. Then he sat himself down at the table with the air of one who means to hold serious communing with himself. He set to work, as it were, in the difficult task of unravelling the tangled skein of his own thoughts, so that he might come to some definite conclusion as to what was to be done, or as to whether there was anything to be done at all. He said to himself, "Now let me think without excitement, as coolly as I can:"—and then he began to enumerate all his late friends and acquaintances, to ascertain whether there might not be *one* amongst them who was likely to advance a sum of money at his wife's request. Then, despite all his endeavours to reason calmly and collectedly, would come the withering, blighting thought—fatal as the blast of the simoon upon the desert—that no one would lend money to the family of a man who was doomed to be hanged! He had been a usurer himself; and he had never lent money without a security, or without a selfish purpose. Who would lend money, then, to his wife without security, and in the absence of any personal object to serve? No—not a soul!

As he came to this conclusion, he sat in the stupor of dismay, gazing vacantly before him, but in reality seeing nothing outwardly—though inwardly his mind was busy with all kinds of harrowing thoughts. Then he insensibly fell into the most torturing imaginings. His fancy became marvellously fertile and wonderfully ingenious—conjuring up the whole hideous panorama presented by the Old Bailey on an execution-day. He beheld the gathered multitudes—the windows thronged with human faces—the front of Newgate, so ominous in its aspect even on the sunniest day—and the gallows standing on the edge of the pavement at the debtor's-door. Gradually, like a dissolving view, did the scene change on the theatre of his fevered fancy, and he now beheld the interior of the gaol on the execution morning. He thought that he saw the cell door open—the Sheriff, the Chaplain, the Governor, and the other functionaries enter, accompanied by an individual whose sinister aspect denoted who he was. Then he thought that this individual pinioned him; and that he passed out of the cell, joining in the procession that was formed, and with solemn march threaded the numerous passages leading to the gibbet. Again, in imagination, did he behold all the scene outside, which appeared to burst this time on his view with exceeding abruptness as he emerged forth from the debtor's-door: and then he thought he ascended the steps of the scaffold—that he stood beneath the fatal beam—that the rope was fastened round his neck, and the night cap drawn over his face. So vividly did the wretched man depict all this to himself—thus dreaming horribly in broad daylight and while wide awake—that he groaned in the bitterness and the agony of his feelings; and this very sound which ascended up from the depths of his soul, awoke him as it were from his frightful reverie.

"Thank God! it was only fancy," he said aloud:

but the next moment, as his eyes glanced round the cell and showed him every feature of that living sepulchre whence there was scarcely more than one step to the grave which would be hollowed to receive him in the stone passage outside,—he shuddered to the extremest confines of his being; while the appalling conviction struck upon him that though it was all fancy at the present moment, yet full soon it must be a frightful reality!

Presently his wife and daughter came; and he overwhelmed them with the bitterest reproaches on account of the seizure of the money by the Sheriff's myrmidons. As if it were their fault! But he was in that fearful mood which requires to vent its spleen and malignity upon some one. He accordingly laid the whole blame to them. They should have secured the money elsewhere—they should have denied that they had any—they should not have allowed the search—in fact, according to *his* account, there were a thousand things which they should have done upon the occasion, but which they did not do.

Suddenly a thought struck him,—yes, a new hope, flashing up like a spark thrown off all in a moment from the fever-heat of his imagination! And now he became all coaxing, and good humour, and cajolery, and fawning meanness towards his wife and daughter, whom he had just been abusing so bitterly and loading with such coarse invectives: but he wished them to take in hand this new idea which had occurred to him, and which had so promptly sprung up into the consistency of hope in his mind.

His wife must at once present a memorial to the government, beseeching it to abandon its claim upon the money seized by the Sheriff. This was Emmerson's new idea; and having done his best to conciliate his wife and daughter, he proceeded to explain what they were to do. They must at once go and get the memorial drawn up by a law stationer, who could do it in an hour or two at the outside. Then they must go to the Home Secretary, either that evening or betimes on the following day, and get the Minister to submit it at once to the Prince Regent. In fact, Emmerson, rendered almost sanguine in this new hope, assured his wife that the plan *must* succeed if she only managed it properly. She promised to do her best—indeed to follow all his directions; and then with the heat of impatience that she should at once commence the work, he hurried her and Arabella away.

A week now passed. We could, if we chose, pause to analyze every feeling which the unhappy man experienced during this interval: we might dissect all the varying emotions that made up the sum of his heart's fevered existence for those seven days. But to do this would be not merely to occupy pages or to fill chapters, but to engage whole volumes. For a week in the life of a man in the great world—moving about at freedom—not knowing when death will come, and not troubling himself either about the matter—is a space of time of comparatively little importance, and is so readily flung away! A week's holiday—a week's pleasure—a week's shooting—a week at the seaside—thus lightly, casually, and indifferently may a week be spoken of and passed. But a week to the man who is doomed to die—who has heard his death sentence pronounced—who is locked up and chained within the massive walls of a dungeon, so that he may not fly from that sentence—who knows that unless something should occur to save him he must be led forth to die on a particular day, at a particular hour, and even within a few minutes more or less of that hour——Oh! to a man in such a condition as this, a week is so precious that every moment may be enumerated, and not a single instant may be wasted! In that week, then, his thoughts are things—his ideas are facts: the minutest sentiment that his imagination experiences has all the gravity of an important incident—his very looks express worlds of emotion. To grapple, therefore, with a subject so vast—so immense—so illimitable as this, were impossible for any writer. But, Oh! does not the bare idea of the rending excruciations—the agonizing crucifixions—which the doomed man thus endures—does it not, we ask, furnish a tremendous argument against the punishment of death?

It was a week of such mental tortures as these which Emmerson endured. Still did he cling to that last hope which he had conceived, and which was based upon the memorial to the Crown. But the bare fact of his entertaining such a hope, aggravated the agonies of suspense and kept his mind in a continual whirl of exciting fears, misgivings, and apprehensions—with the equally harrowing, wearing, tearing process of endeavouring to reason against them. Yes: thus did a week pass. The memorial had been duly drawn up according to his instructions; and it had been sent to the Home Secretary, who declined to receive Mrs. Emmerson personally on the subject. It had been sent, then—and the cold formal answer was returned, that it would receive attention and he laid before His Royal Highness the Prince Regent in due course. Then day after day passed—no farther notice was taken of the memorial—and thus had a whole week elapsed.

One morning, at the expiration of the interval just named, the Governor of Newgate entered the condemned cell; and the wretched Emmerson immediately saw that some dreadful announcement was forthcoming. And it was so. After a few prefatory remarks, of what the Governor considered to be of a suitable character, he proceeded to state that the Recorder had made his report to the Prince Regent, and that Emmerson's execution was fixed to take place on the following Monday. This was Friday—and Emmerson might now not merely calculate the days—not only the hours—but likewise the very minutes he had to live!

When again alone, he sat down upon his bed, covered his face with his hands, and moaned bitterly. Death now seemed to be looking him in the face: and such a dreadful death too! But the memorial?—surely some attention must have been paid to it? If so—and if the money were to be returned—was there not yet time to do all that was needed to accomplish his release? Yes: and now the infatuated man, once more abandoning himself to hope, began to calculate how much might be done in the space of time still remaining. Friday, Saturday, Sunday—three whole days!—and in that interval a thousand rescues might be achieved!

Presently his wife and daughter made their appearance. The former looked really and truly sorrowful—the latter was weeping bitterly: for on arriving at the prison they were told by the Governor that the Recorder's report had been made, that no commutation of the death-sentence had been ordered, but that the execution was fixed for the ensuing

Monday. Therefore, as they entered the condemned cell on this occasion, they felt as if they were coming into the presence of the dead; and Emmerson, with all the keenness which the horrors of his situation had given to every faculty, at once comprehended what they felt and what was passing in their minds.

"Ah! you have heard the news then?" he exclaimed: "and now you are aware of how long a time I have to live—unless indeed something strenuous—something determined and prompt, is done at once on my behalf!"

"But what *can* be done?" asked Arabella, who could not help thinking that her father disengaged himself somewhat quickly and even petulantly from her embrace. "You see no reply is sent to the memorial——"

"That is the very thing I wish you to see about at once! You have neglected it—you have not done your duty—you should have gone day after day and hour after hour to the Home Office. Good God! do you know what it is that depends upon that memorial? It is a life—a human life——*my* life!"—and the wretched man shrieked out the words in frenzied anguish.

"Compose yourself, dear father—for God's sake, compose yourself!" said Arabella: "mother and I will at once go off to the Home Office."

"Yes—go, for heaven's sake—go, my dear wife—my dear daughter!" exclaimed Emmerson, still in wild accents and with almost frantic impetuosity of manner. "Forgive me if I have been harsh or unkind—if I have said anything cruel or hasty. But, O God! you know not how fearfully—how tremendously a man's temper is tried—ay, and how goadingly his nerves are excited, by such a position as *this!* Look you both for a moment," he continued, with so ghastly an expression of countenance, that the feelings it indicated were beyond all power of utterance, as they are likewise beyond the possibility of description: look, I say. I am alive now. Here!—I can walk. See!—I can walk across this room—no, *cell* we will call it—for so it is: and I can move my arms too. Look! I can extend them in any direction I choose. And observe—as I stretch out my hands, I can move about my fingers; and there is vitality in them—and the very nails themselves show animation and life. Then look at my eyes! I can see with them—and they also are indicative of life. You hear me talking: my lips move—my tongue moves also—and my voice sounds upon your ear. Yes—and I can think too——Eternal God! how acute is that power of thought which thou hast given unto man! Moreover, I can hear my heart beat—and in all respects I have a consciousness of life—a knowledge that I *am* alive—a conviction that I am a moving, sentient, animated being. Well, all this you know, and I know too. But a day—an hour—even a very minute is fixed when all this is to cease! Those vital energies and living faculties which I have been describing, are not gradually to waste themselves out and expire by degrees, but are to be extinguished all in a moment. Yes—there will be *one* instant when it shall be alive—capable of moving, thinking and speaking, as I move, think, and speak now; and the *next* instant all will be over! The power of thought, movement, and speech will be annihilated in a moment. It will be the same as suddenly extinguishing a lamp—just the same as suddenly turning off the gas in a room—while the eye winks, changing everything from light to darkness! Now, such is my doom—unless you prove successful in getting back the money, so as to use it as a means for my deliverance."

It was a fearful thing to hear that condemned man thus reason, with a mingled frenzy and philosophy, upon his dread position. There was a wildness so awful, but at the same time so ghastly in his looks, that it made him seem as if it were a maniac talking reason—as if a horrible lucidity of language was united with a shocking rabidness of feeling. A deep, deep impression was made upon the wife and daughter: the cold indifference of the former, which had already yielded to sorrow, now melted into bitter tears—and the genuine grief of the latter was enhanced into the wildest despair. Altogether it was indeed an awful, awful spectacle—and one which does no credit to the boasted humanity, wisdom, and justice of England's laws.

But now let us pause for a few moments to ascertain the reason why the memorial sent to the Home Office had not as yet received any attention. It was not so much the fault of the Minister as that of the Prince Regent. The Minister had gone with it in his pocket half-a-dozen times to Carlton House, during the week that had elapsed: but on one occasion "His Royal Highness was so particularly engaged (in Venetia's boudoir) that he could not see any body;" on another occasion "he was so very seriously indisposed (being awfully drunk) that he could not attend to business." Next time "he was engaged in a matter of great domestic delicacy" (with a troop of dancing girls in one of his gorgeous saloons); and on the fourth occasion "he had met with so severe an accident (through tripping on the stairs when drunk and incapable) that his physician had ordered him not to be disturbed." On another occasion "his Royal Highness had gone to Windsor to manifest his filial regard towards an afflicted sire" (in reality to see how long the old boy was likely to be before he hopped the twig); and another time when the Minister did succeed in gaining access to His Royal Highness, "he was so overcome by his feelings (Curaçoa punch) on hearing the nature of the memorial, that he burst into tears (or in vulgar parlance was *crying drunk*) and begged that the matter might be postponed to a future occasion."

Such were the reasons which must account for the silence that had been observed relative to Mrs. Emmerson's memorial. But when she and Arabella repaired to the Home Office, after the interview with Emmerson as above described, they did succeed in obtaining an interview with the Minister, who addressed them in the following terms:—

"Ladies, I can assure you that I lost no time in submitting your memorial to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent; and his Royal Highness, with that compassionating disposition which so nobly characterizes him, and with that zeal and anxiety which he ever experiences to do justice to all his august father's dutiful and loving subjects, at once took the memorial under his royal consideration. What advice I, as a Cabinet Minister, may have given his Royal Highness on the subject, cannot of course be revealed; and whatever view his Royal Highness has as yet been induced to take

of the matter, must not be disclosed. Ladies, I hope that this explanation will prove completely satisfactory; and in the unfortunate position in which you are placed, it must be a source of great consolation—not to say gratification—to you to know that you possess a Prince who, while exercising his august father's authority, devotes himself night and day to the interests of all classes in the kingdom."

Having thus spoken, with the proper ministerial mixture of official pomposity and diplomatic blandness, the Home Secretary rang the bell, as much as to intimate that the interview was at an end. Mrs. Emmerson was completely bewildered—having vainly endeavoured to discover in that cloud of words an answer to her question relative to the fate of the memorial; and she was about to withdraw, thinking that the answer must have been given, but that she had not comprehended it. Arabella, somewhat more sharp-witted, perceived that no definite reply had been given at all; and she accordingly ventured to remind the Home Minister that he had forgotten the main point for which he so condescendingly granted herself and mother an interview. Thereupon the Minister gave an assurance that the matter should have his very best consideration next week.

"Next week!" shrieked forth Arabella, unmindful of what she said: "but you have ordered my unhappy father to undergo his sentence next Monday——"

"Miss Emmerson," returned the Minister, in an off-hand manner, "it can make no earthly difference to your father whether you get back the money before or after Monday next. His concerns with this life are terminated."

Thereupon he again rang the bell; and the two ladies withdrew. A livery servant conducted them down-stairs, while descending which they exchanged looks of blank despair. They now reentered the hackney coach which had brought them to Downing Street, and hastened back to Newgate, where they imparted to Emmerson the details of their interview with the Home Secretary.

"Then all hope has now abandoned me!" exclaimed the unhappy man: and flinging himself upon the bed, he gave way to an awful outburst of the most violent mental agony.

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It was Sunday night—and the last hours of the doomed man's life were slowly lapsing into the eternity of the past. He had no more hope now: indeed he sought as well as he could to avert his reflections from the affairs of this world.

He had taken leave of his wife and daughter; and when that was over, he felt as if the last straw of hope at which it was possible for him to catch had disappeared. Not that through any feeling of fondness he beheld in them the personification of tender ties linking him to this life; but because it seemed as if there were nothing more to be done by them for the purpose of saving that life. He now felt that he was indeed doomed—that his fate was inevitable—and that in a few short hours he should be no more!

Not one wink of sleep did the unhappy man obtain throughout that night. He had slept his last sleep in this life; and the present vigil was to close only in the stupendous sleep of death!

Alone he sat in his cell, where a candle burnt dimly and fitfully. The Bible was spread open before him; but he could not settle his ideas to read it. Horrible thoughts were agitating in his mind, like grisly phantoms peopling a dark Gothic hall in some ancient castle. He felt as a man who is slowly but surely and irresistibly walking towards the edge of a precipice, over which at a fixed hour, and indeed at a fixed moment, he will fall abruptly. His physical sensations were as intense as his mental ones. His head ached to distraction: it was such a headache as no ordinary experience in such pain can possibly understand. There was a fulness about the temples that seemed as if the brain were swelling to a compass too large to be contained within the skull, and that it was trying to burst through its walls of bone, and flesh, and skin—but could not. There was an excruciating tightness across the eyes, as if a ligature were bound round the head, without interfering with the sight, but drawn to a degree of tension as to become a veritable martyrdom. Besides this agonizing pain, there was a sense of deep oppression at the chest—and in the stomach a profound sinking, as if all were hollow within and the flesh were about to give way. In addition to these sensations, there was a nervous movement of the toes, accompanied by a noise like the cracking of the bones in the feet—especially if the unhappy man rose to pace his cell; as he frequently did in the depth of that long night which seemed to him a thousand years! Then did this ominous cracking of the bones appear redolent of death itself, and made him fancy that he was a moving corpse—a walking skeleton!

As morning came on, the various sensations of pain and uneasiness which the doomed man felt, augmented in intenseness. Indeed, the headache grew insupportable—the tightness across the eyes more full of anguish than aught he could possibly have conceived. Once or twice he lay down in the hope that a reclining posture would give him relief; but the agony became all the more severe—and indeed the fearful excitement of his thoughts would not permit him to remain stationary.

As the dawn glimmered into that condemned cell, and about the same time the candle expired in its socket, the approach of day seemed to add to the already insupportable pain in the temples, while the tightness over the eyes made him feel as if an iron hoop had been fastened round his head and was now being screwed up to its last hold.

The chaplain presently entered the condemned cell, and began to offer the consolations of religion. Emmerson sat down and listened; but he could not fix his thoughts upon anything the reverend gentleman said. He tried to comprehend the Ordinary's words—but could not. His brain was confused—but not with a numbness; it was racked with the bewilderment of a myriad torturing, harrowing, agonizing thoughts.

The morning advanced, and breakfast was brought in to the convict. He endeavoured to drink some coffee; but it seemed to choke him. He could not possibly get his throat to perform its usual functions and swallow it; and when he es-

sayed to force himself to eat a mouthful of bread it was the same as if he tried to masticate an object as dry as a cinder. Again he attempted to drink; but it was with a strong recoil, a loathing, and a powerlessness to swallow—as if he were seized with hydrophobia!

Again did the chaplain endeavour to fix him to his devotions: but though Emmerson would sit for ten minutes at a time gazing on the reverend gentleman, and to all appearance listening intently—devoutly—yet he really distinguished naught that was said—merely heard a humming, droning noise that seemed to have no sense nor meaning. Then he would start up and walk wildly to and fro in his cell, the cracking of his bones mingling horribly with the clanking of his chains: and then he would sit down on his pallet and give way to a violent outburst of anguish. Or else he would begin to load himself with bitterest reproaches for having been so mad as to have done the deed that made him what he was—a doomed man!

Thus did the time pass away until eight o'clock—the fatal hour—was approaching. Then at every sound which met his ear did the pulses quiver throughout his frame with an agony beyond all description. Each time he thought they were coming to bear him away to death. At length the door opened, and the heralds of his doom made their appearance—Governor, Sheriffs, Under-Sheriffs, Javelin-men—and last of all an individual whose sinister look was more than enough to tell who he was and proclaim his errand!

And now commenced the dread ceremony of knocking off the irons from the doomed man's limbs—and then the process of pinioning—to all of which he submitted without the slightest resistance. Resistance indeed! the idea did not once enter his head: for strong, and firm, and indomitable upon him sat the conviction that his fate was at hand and that nothing could avert it.

The preliminaries being all settled, and Daniel Coffin having thus far made his preparatory arrangements, the procession of death began moving away from the condemned cell, through the stone passages, to the scaffold. All that Emmerson had previously pictured to himself in the dread phases of those reveries of which we have before spoken, was now not merely realised, but even transcended in all the horror of reality. Vain were it for us to attempt to delineate the feelings which he experienced as he walked on to death—advancing towards the edge of that precipice over which he was to topple suddenly, heaven alone knew into what realm to pass!

And now he reaches the debtors' door; and the whole panorama of life, and excitement, and animation without, bursts upon his view. He ascends the scaffold; and the newspapers, in giving an account next morning of the execution, declared that he went up the ladder with firm steps. Ah! it was no spontaneous and willing fortitude which he thus evinced—no deliberate evidence of a mind nerved to endure the very worst. Whatever physical energy he might have thus displayed, was purely mechanical, and showed that the movements of his limbs were at the time apart from any influence wielded by the agonizing sensations of the mind.

The crowd was immense: and as he mounted the platform of the huge scaffold, all black and ominous, a profound silence fell upon that countless mass which paved street, window, and house-top, far as the eye could stretch, with faces. Myriads of eyes all seemed to make *him* their common focus: and for an instant he recoiled—he shrank indeed—as if those looks were the rays of ten thousand burning glasses all fixed upon him and scorching him to the very heart's core!

"Courage, sir," whispered Daniel Coffin: "and it will soon be over. Now then for the night cap."

As he thus spoke the dreadful man's rude hands grasped the night cap which had already been placed on Emmerson's head: but just at the very instant it was about to be drawn down over his face, he caught a glimpse of a well-known countenance that was upturned towards the scaffold from the very first rank of the vast crowd pressing around the barrier. A horrible feeling—more horrible than can be well conceived even in the midst of feelings which were *all* intensely horrible—seized upon the wretched Emmerson, as he thus caught the look which was turned upward with diabolic malignity towards him: for that countenance which thus appeared there to mock his last dying agonies, was Theodore Varian's!

A groan—but a subdued and half-stifled one—came up to Emmerson's lips, as he thus felt not only how he was punished for all he had done to that young man, but also how terribly that young man himself had avenged the injuries he had received: and while this reflection was sweeping like a scorching trail of fire through Emmerson's brain, the night cap was drawn down over his face, the halter being already affixed to his neck.

"O God! O God!" moaned the wretched man—wretched, wretched, beyond the power of imagination to conceive or of language to describe, as he stood for about the interval of twenty seconds on the drop while Daniel Coffin descended to pull the bolt and let it fall.

The bell of St. Sepulchre was tolling with lugubrious note, and the Chaplain was drooing forth the solemn service for the dead: a breathless silence seemed to sit like a spell upon the multitude—and all this while the sun was shining bright in its golden glory upon the tremendous scene. And in the midst of those sounds of church-bell and of prayer—in the midst of that deep stupendous silence which hushed the breath of ten thousand spectators gathered there—and in the midst, too, of the glow of the effulgent sunlight—did the last phase of the tragedy suddenly take place. The bolt was drawn—the drop fell—and in a few seconds all was over.

The once eminent City money-broker was dead; and the crowd waited an hour to see him taken down. Be assured, reader, that Theodore Varian remained until the very last! Yes—*he* remained until the clock struck nine, when Daniel Coffin cut the corpse down and let it fall into the shell which was ready for its reception in the hollow of the scaffold.

There was now no more to see. Theodore Varian had pursued his vengeance up to the very last; and as the crowds dispersed slowly, he took his departure more slowly still—as if still inclined to linger, with a sort of horrible morbid gloating, near the spot where his mortal enemy had just gone out of existence.

But on leaving that fatal scene, did he at once return to his sister Ariadne, to tell her how Emmerson had died and all the particulars of the execution? No: for Ariadne would have shrunk from such abhorrent details.

CHAPTER CLXIX.

VALENTINE MALVERN.

THE reader will remember that conversation which took place between the beautiful Florence Eaton and the handsome Valentine Malvern on the day when their love for each other was revealed. In their mutual frankness they had laid bare their hearts' secrets; and while Valentine candidly informed Florence that he could never rest quiet until he should have penetrated the mystery of his father's fate, the young lady confessed to him that the particulars of her interview with the Prince Regent at St. James's Palace some months previously had appeared to interweave themselves with her destiny. The reader perhaps will likewise remember that Valentine promised to do his best in order to discover if there were indeed any particular secret connected with the proceedings of that interview, and with the miniature which had produced so powerful a sensation upon his Royal Highness.

On subsequently reflecting with due calmness upon this pledge which he had given, Valentine felt annoyed with himself: for he knew not how he could possibly take any steps in the matter. Besides, he considered that if there were really anything to tell, and anything with which Florence herself might in propriety be made acquainted, Lady Florimel would not have kept her in the dark upon the subject. Therefore, for him to interfere in any way seemed an unwarrantable meddling in a delicate matter: and hence was it that Valentine regretted having given anything like a promise at all. But on each occasion that he saw Florence, she more or less alluded to the subject; and it was indeed easy to perceive that it had made a most powerful impression upon her mind. Malvern endeavoured to reason her out of a belief which was thus unmistakably gaining a sort of superstitious ascendancy over her: but she assured him that so strong was the influence thus left upon her imagination by the occurrences of the interview with the Prince, that unless the mystery were cleared up it would produce the effect of a secret grief preying upon her mind.

"I know," Florence would say to her lover, on those occasions when they were alone together, and the topic was touched upon, "that you must think me foolish and weak-minded to suffer that occurrence to wield such a power over me. But I cannot help it. It is a feeling against which there is no battling—no struggling. It is stronger than I, and capable of subduing any amount of mental energy which I possess. It is a presentiment which has entered into my mind, and now forms part of it. It is as if the mysterious voice of an inward nature were speaking in my soul."

In such language as this would the beautiful Florence Eaton address Valentine when they were together; and as he was now her acknowledged suitor, not only accepted by herself but also formally recognized as such by Lord and Lady Florimel, he was a daily visitor at the house. Often did he represent to Florence that the most prudent step to be taken would be either for *her* to confess, or for *him* to represent, to Lord and Lady Florimel the nature of the mystic feelings which were thus preying as it were upon her. Yielding to his advice, and being unwilling that any steps should be taken which might savour of undutifulness or of ingratitude towards her kind relatives, Florence at length gave Valentine permission to adopt exactly what course he might think fit in the matter. He accordingly at once resolved to be candid and explicit with Lady Florimel; and seeking an immediate interview with her, he explained all that Florence had at any time said to him relative to the impression made upon her mind by the interview with the Prince Regent and the affair of the miniature portrait.

Pauline listened with the deepest attention and with an equal amount of interest. Her countenance grew serious, with a shade of melancholy also, as Valentine proceeded; and when he had finished she remained for some time silent and lost in thought.

"My dear Mr. Malvern," she said, at length breaking silence, "as the future husband of my much-loved niece, you have a right to demand every explanation relative to anything that may seem to concern her. Yes—there is indeed a secret connected with that dear girl—a secret which also regards one who when alive was most dear unto myself—I mean my sister, the mother of Florence! Fain would I that this secret should have remained entombed with her who has long ago gone down into the silent grave: but it seems to me now as if fate has determined that it shall be otherwise. However, this secret is not entirely at my own disposal—nor indeed should I of my own accord feel justified in revealing it."

She paused—sighed profoundly—and gazed with melancholy looks upon a portrait of Octavia, her departed sister, which hung in the room where this interview took place. Valentine Malvern said nothing: indeed he knew not what to say—he was almost sorry that he had entered upon the topic at all; and yet it was so absolutely necessary to take some step to satisfy his beloved Florence!

"Yes," continued Pauline, in melancholy accents, while her truly handsome countenance was shaded with a kindred expression,—"both I and my husband have observed for some man his past that the incidents at the palace were not forgotten by Florence. Deeply have I regretted that I ever should have taken her thither, and have thus placed her in a position of receiving impressions which, when nature's voice speaks out thus, are indeed but too well calculated to make a powerful impression upon her young, artless, and susceptible mind. Until now it has always been my endeavour as well as my hope to conceal from Florence a secret the knowledge of which is by no means necessary to her happiness and welfare, but which may interfere with the healthy equanimity of her mind. But it seems, as I have already said, that this secret is *not* to be concealed: and therefore, since fate has decreed that it must be made known, as well now as at any future period! But again I repeat, my dear Mr. Malvern, that from *my* lips you cannot learn it. This secret is not altogether mine; and from the individual whom it more especially concerns must you seek the revelation of the mystery. Go to him therefore—go forthwith

—tell him who you are—that you are the accepted suitor of Florence Eaton, and that you have come to learn from his lips all he may choose to reveal concerning her!"

"But you have not named him—I mean the personage to whom your ladyship alludes?" exclaimed Valentine, though more than half suspecting who it was that her words thus indicated—yes, and likewise already beginning to entertain some conception of the nature of that secret he was seeking to penetrate.

"The personage to whom you are to address yourself," replied Pauline solemnly, "is his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. I can now tell you no more: go and see him at once!"

With these words Lady Florimel rose abruptly from her seat and hurried from the room, in order to seek the solitude of her own chamber and give vent to the varied feelings of affliction and sorrow which the preceding discourse conjured up. Then, so soon as she had somewhat composed her mind, she despatched a hasty note to the Prince Regent, giving a few necessary explanations, so that he might not be altogether unprepared for the visit of Valentine Malvern.

Immediately after his interview with Lady Florimel, Malvern returned to the apartment where Florence was anxiously awaiting him; and the moment he re-entered that room, she hastened to meet him, gazing up into his countenance with an expression of mingled curiosity, interest, and timidity.

"Your aunt, dear Florence, and I," commenced Valentine, "have had a most serious conversation together. She is not offended with you: she is not angry at the questions which have been put to her. On the contrary, she herself has seen the influence which that occurrence at St. James's Palace produced upon your mind; and she admits that the time is come when the secret must be revealed to you."

"Ah! then there *is* a secret!" exclaimed Florence, an expression of intense anxiety now appearing upon her lovely countenance.

"Yes—there *is* a secret, dearest," returned Valentine: "but as yet I know it not. It is to be learnt elsewhere—and I am now about to proceed in the investigation. Ask me no more questions at the present moment: I go at once upon this mission. On my return you will perhaps know all——An hour or two—or if not to-day, most assuredly to-morrow—will clear up all your suspense. Can you not, dearest Florence, control your feelings?"

"Oh! yes," she exclaimed: "were I so weak-minded as not to be able to do *that*, I should scarcely be worthy of your esteem and confidence. Besides, if for months past I have supported and borne up against this torturing influence which has been gnawing as it were at my very heart's core—surely I can now endure suspense for a few hours, or even a few days longer? Go then, Valentine, and accomplish your mission, whatever and wherever it may be. I ask no more at present."

The young gentleman embraced the beautiful girl, and then took his leave.

It was now three o'clock in the afternoon; and Valentine knew it to be a very likely hour to obtain an audience of his Royal Highness. He accordingly repaired at once to Carlton House—entered the waiting-room—and gave his card in the usual manner to the principal valet in attendance. In about a quarter of an hour Malvern was informed that His Royal Highness was most particularly engaged for the present, but that if he would return at nine o'clock in the evening, the Prince would cheerfully grant him an interview—*and indeed wished on his own part to see him.*

Thereupon Valentine Malvern took his departure from Carlton House, wondering what the last portion of the message could mean. But he did not go back again that afternoon to Florence. He thought it likely that not only she and her aunt might have some serious conversation together after what had taken place; but he likewise felt that it was better not to provoke any mental excitement by running backwards and forwards merely to acquaint her with what was being done. Accordingly, to while away the time until his dinner-hour, Malvern proceeded to Long Acre, where he called upon Mr. Lawrence Sampson—as was indeed frequently his wont—to ascertain whether any farther clue had been discovered to the mysterious disappearance of the late Sir Archibald Malvern.

"I have not lost sight of the matter, sir," said the famous Bow Street officer, in answer to Valentine's inquiries: "but the affair is still wrapped in as dark a cloud as ever. The only clue which we have obtained is that letter which shows that your father, sir, was engaged in an affair of gallantry. It is a strange thing that this letter should be in the very same identical handwriting as that one which was written to give information about Paul Dysart, who was hanged at the Old Bailey, you remember."

"A beautiful, fluent, and lady-like writing," observed Valentine: "indeed it is an elegant hand. Ah! would to heaven that we could discover the authoress!"

"Yes, sir," continued Sampson: "I myself have all along entertained the opinion that your lamented father has fallen a victim to female jealousy; because the woman who could have given Paul Dysart up to the hangman, was not likely to have hesitated to avenge herself upon Sir Archibald Malvern, supposing that he had done anything to provoke her resentment."

"Your inference is a natural one," said the young gentleman. "Let me look once more at that letter of which you first spoke, and which I discovered amongst my father's papers. I think that I left it in your hands."

Larry Sampson opened an iron safe, and from a bundle of papers produced a letter which he handed to Valentine, saying, "Here is the one to which you allude. The writing is as similar as possible to that other one which was sent to the magistrate at Bow Street, and which gave the information that led to the capture of Dysart. But that one I have not got now. However you saw it at the time, and were struck by the resemblance."

Malvern took the letter which Sampson, while thus talking, handed to him; and as he perused the anonymous epistle, his countenance grew deeply mournful.

"Yes," he said: "I recollect the similitude between the two letters—recollect it as well indeed as if the other one were before me now. There

VENETIA AS QUEEN OF THE REVELS.

cannot be a shadow of a doubt as to the identity of the two hands. But by the bye, when you called upon Lady Ernestina Dysart at the time, and she informed you that she had not the slightest idea of any gallant intrigue which her husband was carrying on—nor of any female who was likely to take so vindictive a step as that evidenced by the anonymous letter sent to the magistrate,—she kept that anonymous letter; did she not?"

"Yes—to show to her husband, who was then in Newgate," answered Sampson. "She did not return the letter to me; and after all the trouble she gave herself in the matter—overwhelmed with calamity too at the time—I did not like to call a second time and ask for it."

"No, certainly not," exclaimed Malvern. "But pray do not lose sight of the inquiry altogether," he continued. "Keep this letter—and the chapter of accidents may one of these days, sooner or later, turn up something which may lead us a step farther in the investigation—perhaps elucidate the mystery altogether."

Having thus spoken, Malvern threw a bank note upon the table by way of a "refresher" for the Bow Street officer; and then took his departure.

Precisely at nine o'clock in the evening did Valentine present himself at Carlton House; and the same valet whom he had seen in the morning, at once conducted him up the splendid staircase, to a small but elegant parlour in the suite of apartments specially appropriated to the Prince's use. His Royal Highness was not there at the moment; and the valet requested Malvern to be seated, stating that the Prince would join him in a few minutes.

When left alone, Valentine could not help admiring the tasteful richness of the furniture and the elegance of the ornaments scattered about. Notwithstanding the important matter uppermost

in his thoughts, and the belief that he was about to hear some very grave and solemn secret relative to his beloved Florence, yet his well cultivated mind could still experience an interest in the magnificence of three or four pictures which hung to the walls—the chaste elegance of a few specimens of sculptured alabaster—and likewise the rich colouring of some porcelain vases whence odours were distilled. His attention was also drawn towards the mantle-piece, where an ebony stand sustained a French *or-molu* clock, in the middle of which there was a hollow containing several figures of men and women, about an inch in height, beautifully carved in ivory, and coloured to imitate life,—all moving about in obedience to the hidden mechanism.

While standing near the chimney-piece contemplating this beautiful clock, Valentine's eyes suddenly encountered a portion of a letter which had been thrust behind another ornament on the mantel. But why does Malvern start in sudden amazement?—why do his eyes remain fixed with a strange expression upon that portion of a note? It is because, in consequence of its being torn, some of the writing is visible; and this writing bears the most perfect resemblance to that of the note which in the afternoon he so attentively scanned at Larry Sampson's house!

Let us here pause for a moment to state that his Royal Highness had lunched by himself in this particular room in the middle of the day, and that he had afterwards indulged in a cigar. A wax taper had been placed on the table; but as the Prince could not possibly bear the idea of putting his cigar in contact with the wick of a candle, he had taken from his pocket a note which he had a little while previously received, and whence he tore off a portion wherewith to light the cigar. The other portion he negligently left lying on the table; and when the domestics entered at a later hour to clear away the things and put the room in order, one of them had placed the remnant of that letter on the mantel, not knowing whether it might be inquired for again or not.

Such was the way in which this portion of the letter came to be in the place where it now attracted the notice and at once rivetted the gaze of Valentine Malvern. For nearly a minute did he stand motionless as a statue, but with lips apart—his countenance pale and anxious—and his eyes fixed upon the object of this profound and concentrated interest. At length, and with a sudden start, he reached forth his hand—took the note—and without further reflection or hesitation, examined it with the closest scrutiny. And who can blame him? It was an impulsive deed; a father's fate was uppermost in the young man's mind—it was no vulgar feeling of curiosity—on the contrary, it was an act produced by the generous prompting of a strong filial piety. No thought had he at the moment of penetrating into the secrets of others, or violating the sanctity of private correspondence: one sentiment—and one only—was dominant in his soul—namely, the hope of discovering something that might elucidate the mystery of a deplored father's loss.

While examining the writing to convince himself that it was the same as the two notes already alluded to, he insensibly read all that was upon this fragment of a letter which he was inspecting; and these were the words which his eyes thus followed:—

"July 10th, 1815

"My dear Prince,

"You will doubtless be surprised to receive a letter from me. But I am most anxious to see your Royal Highness. I am leading a life which is perfectly miserable: monotonous—gloomy—lonely to a degree! You who are so fond of pleasure, must pity me in the dulness of that solitary retreat whence I write this. Indeed, I can endure it no longer, and shall be up in London to-morrow—when I shall take the liberty of calling upon your Royal Highness. But will it be *a liberty?* After all that has occurred between us I hope not! Indeed, I flatter myself that I shall be welcomed by your Royal Highness. Believe me, my dear Prince, I often, often think of you——Ah! if you only thought of me one-tenth part as often, I should indeed be ensured the kindest reception at your hands! However, to-morrow evening, at ten o'clock precisely, I shall put your humour to the test by presenting myself at the private staircase; when, if you mean to be amiable towards me, you will give orders that I shall not be kept waiting a moment; and I will then explain to you why it is—unless indeed you already surmise the reasons wherefore I have withdrawn so long from London and * * * * * * * * * * * *

All the rest of the letter was torn away: but those lines which Malvern had just read, contained an important announcement. The letter had been written on the previous day: it was therefore on this very evening, at ten o'clock, that the writer of it purposed to call upon the Prince Regent. But who could the lady be that was evidently on such familiar terms with his Royal Highness? Was it not fair to suppose that she was some person of rank and consequence? But what a dangerous as well as profligate character she must be, thought Valentine; if she had indeed anything to do with his father's disappearance. At all events she assuredly had surrendered Dysart up to the scaffold; and therefore was she not dangerous to a degree? As for her profligacy, it was but too evident that she had been intimate with his father and with the Prince Regent—most likely with Dysart also!

Such were the thoughts that passed rapidly through Malvern's brain, as he hastily replaced the letter—or rather the fragment of a letter—upon the mantel: and scarcely had he done this, when the Prince Regent entered the room.

Advancing with the utmost affability, and what Court sycophancy would term "the most gracious condescension," he at once gave the young gentleman his hand, saying, "Sir Valentine Malvern—for so I suppose I must call you—I bid you welcome here. Nay, be not astonished at this declaration on my part! Did not my domestic assure you to-day that I should be very glad to see you this evening?"

"I did indeed receive such a kind message from your Royal Highness," answered Valentine: "and you must permit me, sir, to express my profound gratitude."

"Sit down," said the Prince; "and we will talk together. I know why you have come. Indeed, a minute or two before you called this afternoon, I received a note from Lady Florimel to tell me that you *were* coming, and what your object was in seeking an interview with me. I sent down to assure you that I should be glad to see you in the evening, because, as I learn from Lady Florimel's note, you are engaged to her niece Miss Florence Eaton: and I am much interested in that young lady. Can you

not suspect—have you no idea of the cause of this interest which I feel towards Florence?"—and as the Prince gave utterance to this question, his manner grew serious and a shade fell over his countenance: for of all his many, many mistresses, either living or dead, he could perhaps speak lightly and indifferently—but not of that bright and beauteous creature who had loved him so tenderly and so well—the injured, the ill-used, the perished Octavia!

"Some suspicion floats dimly and vaguely in my mind," answered Malvern, perceiving how much the Prince was moved as he spoke—knowing how much it took to move the Prince at all—and from all this receiving an additional impulse for his conjectures: "but to that suspicion I dare not give utterance!"

"And why not?" asked his Royal Highness, gazing earnestly upon the young man.

"Because," he rejoind, "to breathe the suspicion which previous circumstances had engendered, and which your present words, sir, as well as your looks, have strengthened in my mind, would be to impeach the honour of a certain lady who is now no more."

The Prince Regent sighed: then, placing his hand in a breast-pocket, he slowly drew forth a miniature-portrait, set in a morocco case; and handing it to Malvern, he said, "It is the likeness of one who loved me well—too well—too well—far better than I deserved!"

"Then, sir, my suspicion is confirmed," said Valentine. "This is the mother of Florence—this was Octavia, Lady Marchmont!"

"Yes: but she proved not unfaithful to her husband," answered the Prince, in a low and mournful tone: for he felt not merely a sentiment of melancholy and remorse, but likewise of awe when speaking of the dead Octavia. "Florence was born before she married Arthur Eaton, who subsequently became Lord Marchmont; and to him she proved a good, true, and faithful wife during the brief period they were allowed to remain in this world. To save the mother's reputation, Florence has always passed as the issue of that marriage."

"But she is in reality your Royal Highness's daughter?" said Malvern. "Oh! how inscrutable are the ways of Providence! how strange and mysterious are the instincts which stir within us! The voice of nature has been crying in her soul—her heart has yearned towards you, her father! She saw you grieved and afflicted on the occasion of that interview at St. James's Palace; and it touched the tenderest chord in her being. It was to a father's feeling that this chord responsively vibrated; and she was stricken as it were with a deathless sentiment towards *you!* She has told me that she could not be happy so long as that mysterious sensation hung quivering as it were in the depths of her soul; and I vowed to discover whether there was any reality in her presentient feelings, or whether she was labouring under some morbid delusion."

"Think you that she will be happier," asked the Prince, "by the knowledge of this secret? or will she not feel deep sorrow at the history of what she may conceive to be a mother's shame? Take care, Malvern, how you break these tidings to her, and how you tell her the tale! I would sooner hear that harm had happened to my own legitimate daughter the Princess Charlotte, than know that the blight of affliction had fallen upon the heart of this sweet, this angelic girl!"

It was a strange thing to hear the Prince Regent talk thus: for it was with a genuine emphasis and an unquestionable sincerity that he gave utterance to this solemn averment. Valentine was of course no stranger to the profligacy of his character, the dissoluteness of his life, and the heartlessness of his disposition: he therefore knew that it must indeed be some powerful and exceptional sentiment that thus could bend a mind so callous and leave an impression upon a soul so saturated with all vices and demoralizing influences.

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured," said Malvern, deeply affected, "that the secret shall be revealed to Florence in the most delicate manner possible. Lady Florimel will no doubt undertake the task herself. What person can be more fitted to do this than the amiable, the excellent, the kind-hearted relative who has been a mother to the orphan girl? But Lady Florimel felt that the secret was not her own, and must not be revealed without your Royal Highness's permission. That permission you now give?"

"Yes—freely, freely," responded the Prince. "And yet it were better so far as the world is concerned, that this secret should still remain confined to the knowledge of as few as possible."

"Undoubtedly," exclaimed Malvern. "It were madness—it were wickedness, as well as being needless and useless, to throw a stain upon the memory of Florence's departed mother!"

"This being the understanding," resumed the Prince, "I shall not attend your bridal: but my best wishes will be with you. And permit me to offer something more substantial than good wishes. What can I do for you? I have everything to give except money—and *that*, God knows, all Prince and almost Sovereign as I am, is scarce enough with me! But you are rich, I am told—and the Florimels are rich: therefore money you need not. Will you have a peerage? An excuse can easily be found for conferring it upon you."

"Accept my gratitude, sir, for this well meant proposal," answered Valentine: "but I must respectfully decline it. I seek not honours and titles. If it should appear in the end—as I am afraid indeed it will—that my lamented father is no more, then am I already a Baronet: and even if he should yet re-appear—which, though so much to be desired, is so little probable—still do I remain the heir to his title. That title is sufficient for my ambition."

At this moment the door of the apartment opened; and Lady Sackville entered, hastily exclaiming, "Prince, why have you left us thus? The whole company are crying out for you; and I have been looking everywhere——"

But here the brilliant Venetia stopped short; and a sudden pallor appeared upon her countenance, as well as a confusion in her manner, as her eyes now met the looks of Valentine Malvern. For he had his back towards the door at the moment she made her appearance; and now as he rose from his seat and turned towards her, such was the impression he made upon her. As for himself, he surveyed her with evident interest—indeed with a renewal of that feeling of mingled surprise and uncertainty which he had experienced

when he saw her at St. George's Church on the day of her marriage.

"Are you acquainted with each other?" inquired the Prince: "or shall I introduce you?"

"Sir Valentine Malvern, I believe?" exclaimed Venetia, recovering in a moment all her wonted presence of mind: and advancing with the utmost affability towards the young gentleman, she at once gave him her hand, observing, "Oh! yes, we are no strangers to each other:"—but at the same time she threw a look of the deepest meaning upon Valentine, as much as to imply that no more need be said upon the circumstance of their previous acquaintance, or how, when, and where they *had* met on any former occasion.

Venetia was grandly beautiful this night. She was giving a splendid entertainment in her own suite of apartments, and was attired in a sort of fancy dress as Queen of the Revels. She wore upon her head a jewelled diadem, which, bright though it were, was not more lustrous than the rich auburn of her own shining hair. Her robe was trimmed with ermine; and altogether she had a queenly look.

"Will you come and join us in the gay festivity which is now at its height?" she asked of Malvern; and her smile was full of a cordial welcome—indeed, its affability was in itself an eloquent though mute proffer of friendship.

"I thank your ladyship," answered Valentine, his manner now displaying the sentiment of interest towards Venetia, without the astonishment and doubt which had previously commingled therewith: for all uncertainty had been suddenly cleared up by her own words, and he now knew that she was *the same* whom he had met before, but under circumstances of a very, very different character from those in which she was now placed. "I thank your ladyship," he continued, "for this polite—this courteous—this kind invitation: but I am about to take leave of his Royal Highness, and have then an engagement of a business-nature elsewhere."

"In that case I excuse you this evening, Sir Valentine," exclaimed Venetia: "but I shall expect you to favour me with a call just the same as if you had actually been present at my *soirée* this evening. Now mind," she added with a meaning glance; "I wish to see you:"—and as at that moment the Prince was looking at his watch, and comparing it with the time-piece on the mantel—for he now suddenly recollected that *other* appointment which he had for ten o'clock—Lady Sackville placed her finger for a moment upon her lip; and again extending her hand affably to Valentine, wished him "good evening."

He gave a slight but perceptible inclination of his head to show that he understood the meaning of that signal she had so rapidly made, and that he would preserve silence relative to whatever topic it was she had thus mutely but eloquently alluded to: and the brilliant Venetia then quitted the room. Valentine therefore took his leave of the Prince, who shook him cordially by the hand, observing, "Whatever I can do for you—whatever favour the possession of power can bestow—you have but to name your wish at any time, and it shall be gratified."

Malvern again thanked the Prince for this proffered generosity, and left the room. In the passage outside a domestic was waiting to escort him down stairs again; and he issued forth from the palace.

But instead of proceeding straight homeward—indeed, without even quitting the vicinage of Carlton House—he hastened in the direction of the carriage-way leading down to the private door. Consulting his watch by a street-lamp, he saw that it wanted five minutes to ten; and thus the hour of appointment for the Prince and the writer of the letter, was close at hand. At this very moment an ill-looking fellow came along Pall Mall; and Malvern, judging by his apparel that he was a man who would not refuse to go upon an errand if well paid, at once stopped him.

"I will give you a guinea," he said, "if you will run for me as far as Bow Street—or rather Long Acre——"

"Aye, to be sure," returned the man, in a voice that was not a whit more musical than his countenance was pleasing: but Malvern had not time to make any reflections upon all this.

"Here is the guinea," he hastily continued; "and now you must lose no time, but run up to Mr. Lawrence Sampson's——Do you know where he lives?"

"Well, I *rather* think I do," replied the man, with a sort of ironical tone. "Everybody knows him, and he knows everybody."

"Well then, be quick—and tell him to come down here at once. Explain to him this very spot—you can't mistake it—the passage leading out of Pall Mall to the private door——"

"I know all about it," interrupted the man. "What name shall I say? 'cause why, Larry—I mean Mr. Sampson—mayn't believe me."

"Tell him that Mr. Valentine Malvern," quickly rejoined the young gentleman, "has sent you. But one moment!" he exclaimed, the thought striking him that being paid beforehand, the fellow might not take the trouble to perform the errand. "You can come back the moment you have delivered your message; you will find me somewhere about here—and I will give you another guinea."

"Well and good," exclaimed the man: "you are a regular gentleman and no mistake,"—and away sped the fellow in the direction of Long Acre, muttering to himself, "Well, I'm blowed if this don't look uncommon like an adventure where accident seems resolved that I shall have the putting of a finger in the pie."

CHAPTER CLXX.

A FAVOURITE VISITRESS.

When Valentine Malvern took his leave of the Prince in the manner already described, his Royal Highness did not return to Lady Sackville's suite of apartments in compliance with her request. He sent up a message to the effect that important business had just transpired to detain him away a little longer, but that he would assuredly rejoin her gay assembly by eleven o'clock.

Having taken this precaution to guard against the chance of being sought after by her during the next hour, the Prince at once repaired to an apartment in the immediate vicinage of the private staircase, and which has before been described to the reader. It

was that one where he received Venetia—not on the first occasion of her visit to Carlton House, when still simple Miss Trelawney—but on that evening when, after her marriage with Sackville, she for the first time abandoned herself to the royal voluptuary's embrace. From this apartment a side-door opened into a bed-chamber fitted up with a surpassing luxury. This door was however closed for the present: but no doubt the Prince intended that it should presently be opened—else why had he resolved upon receiving his expected visitant in the small but sumptuously furnished apartment which he had now sought?

The table was spread with wines, and with a choice dessert of the most delicious fruits in or out of season. The curtains were drawn over the windows—the atmosphere was perfumed with flowers in porcelain vases—and the splendid lustre hanging to the ceiling, diffused a golden light through the room. The general aspect thereof was luxurious to a degree; and throwing himself upon the sofa near which the table was placed, the Prince began to give way to those voluptuous reflections and sensual imaginings which were most congenial to his mind.

Although he had been moved by the nature of his interview with Valentine Malvern—yes, and more deeply moved, too, than he had perhaps been for many, many years—yet the effect soon wore off. Indeed, none of the better feelings of nature could become the means of making any permanent impression upon his mind. Nor did he allow such a salutary influence to abide with him one moment longer than he could shake it off by a natural effort or by the aid of artificial stimulants. Thus was it that on the present occasion he at once, on entering this room, had recourse to the wine-decanter to dispel the feeling of chastening sadness and mournful memory produced by the interview with Malvern; and as the fervid glow of the generous fluid suffused itself throughout his frame, he at once plunged into that fount of luxurious imaginings whence he drew his most sensual inspirations.

It was a splendid woman who was about to visit him—a woman whose voluptuous beauties were second only to those of Venetia,—a woman in whose arms he had before revelled, and whose provocative powers for amorous play he well knew. What though she was not merely profligate to a degree, but also stained with crime? What though she had sought to shed human blood, and that she had only escaped being an actual murderess by the recovery of her victim? For all this the Prince Regent recked not: he remembered only the enchanting loveliness of her countenance—the firm and swelling fulness of her form—the passion that glowed in her fine dark eyes—the halo of sensuousness and the perfume of love in which she appeared to exist when under the influence of passion and desire!

While thus abandoning himself to his luscious imaginings, the Prince was interrupted by the opening of a door covered with a velvet curtain, and his confidential valet Germain, appearing for a moment on the threshold, introduced a lady cloaked and veiled. He then immediately withdrew—the door closed—the velvet curtain fell back—and the Prince hastened to give a cordial welcome to Lady Ernestina Dysart.

She was no longer dressed in mourning: indeed the widows' weeds which for the sake of appearances she had worn for a few months, had been for some time laid aside: and as she now put off her handsome bonnet with its thick black veil, and her mantle so light, so elegant, and so well fitted for wear on a summer's night,—she stood before the Prince in a figured silk dress of the richest material, and which setting close to her shape, revealed all its grand proportions to their utmost advantage. Cut low in the body, and leaving the arms entirely bare, that dress developed the fine contour of her person in a manner but too well calculated to produce a powerful effect upon the Prince; and as he gazed upon her after conducting her to a seat, and placing himself by her side, he was satisfied that no mental excitement or vexation which she might have endured had in any way marred the ravishing attractions of her charms.

Had she been a fiend in human shape and he had known that such was the fact, still would all his ideas and all his thoughts have been absorbed in the sense of enjoyment which the contact of so splendid and voluptuous a beauty inspired. Her hair showered in light brown tresses over her shoulders so dazzling in their polished whiteness. Her neck was graceful in its swan-like curvature, and of alabaster fairness. Grandly rose her bosom from the ample chest,—its full luxuriance and richness of volume making the waist seem even more delicate than it really was. Her large dark eyes, contrasting in colour so strongly with her hair, but shaded with dark lashes, were full of passion's lustre; and from beneath their fringe they flung forth wanton looks upon the Prince, as if to rivet that hold which the effect of her charms had already taken upon his senses. At the same time her scarlet lips, slightly parting with a smile ineffably bewitching, revealed the pearly teeth; and her balmy breath fanned the cheek of his Royal Highness as he gradually approached his countenance towards her own.

"You are beautiful, Ernestina—beautiful as ever!" he exclaimed, flinging his arms around her, and then pressing his lips to her delicious mouth. "Ah! full well do I remember the first time I ever beheld you! Beautiful enchantress, lovely deceiver that you were—you made me fancy you came from some far-off orient clime: and such was the magic influence of your charms, that I believed you! Indeed, had you assured me that you were an angel descended from heaven, I should have believed you equally as well—yes, I should have believed you!"

"You allude, dear Prince, to that memorable night," she said, with an arch smile in which were concentrated a thousand fascinations, "when you were brought in such a mysterious way to Beechey Manor, and when I appeared in the gossamer dress."

"Ah! that gossamer dress," exclaimed the Prince, not only feasting his eyes with the presence of the beauteous woman, but also his imagination with the memory of past delights. "Never, never shall I forget how wondrously it became you! You were apparelled as if in an eastern fashion, with a splendid shawl round the waist, pearls upon the neck, and bracelets upon your arms. Oh! you looked like an oriental Sultana,

in the mingled magnificence, softness, lustre, and luxuriance of your beauty."

"You render me quite vain with all these compliments," murmured Ernestina, throwing a tremulousness into her musical voice, and fixing upon the Prince the dangerous fascination of her large dark eyes.

"No—you cannot be rendered vain, because I am paying you no compliment," he said, reclining his head upon her shoulder. "I am telling you the truth. Think you that if you were not so wondrously beautiful—think you that I should not have been offended by the stratagem set on foot that night and by the part which you played in it? But no—not for an instant did I feel vexed or angry. All the alarm and all the annoyance I had experienced, and all sense of outrage I felt, were amply compensated for by the presence of your beauty and the delights of Paradise I tasted in your arms. In respect to such scenes as those my memory is immortal: and assuredly, Ernestina, one of the brightest chapters in my life was the adventure which made you mine on that blissful night. Nor have I forgotten the second time when we met. Do you remember? It was at your uncle Lord Leveson's; and as I entered the room you were seated at the harp——"

"Think you that my memory is less vivid than your own?" asked the wily Ernestina, drawing down the Prince's head in such a way that it now rested upon her heaving bosom. "You know that I love you, my Prince; and never has your image been absent from my memory since that night when first we met at Beechey Manor. But *you*," she continued, with a deep sigh, "have so many lovely faces at all times to form the varied subjects of your thoughts, that when I was away, doubtless my image never intruded itself upon your mind?"

"On the contrary, dear Ernestina, I have thought of you often," exclaimed the Prince. "Indeed, you and Lady Sackville are the two handsomest women in all England—not only in all England, but in all the world——"

"Ah! if I really thought that you meant what you said," exclaimed Ernestina: and then bending her countenance down till it touched his own as it lay pillowed upon her bosom, she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses.

"Why should you mistrust my love for you, Ernestina?" asked the Prince. "Have I ever done aught, either by word or deed, to make you think that I do not love you—that I do not entertain a delightful recollection of the joys I have experienced in your arms? And have I not this night convinced you by the reception I have sought to give you here, that my feelings towards you are the same as ever?"

"Yes, my beloved Prince," exclaimed Ernestina; "and I thank you—oh! I thank you most sincerely for this goodness on your part. Since last I saw you I have been very, very unhappy——"

"Yes, I have indeed felt for you," interrupted the Prince: "for I could well understand the meaning of that terrible adventure on the bridge——"

"Oh! and you do not think the worse of me for it?" she asked, in a soft murmuring tone, with her head still bent down so that her warm cheek rested on the Prince's brow.

"Think worse of you for it!" he exclaimed: "no—assuredly not! I suppose it all arose from the persecution you experienced at the hands of that ruffian Coffin?"

"Yes—it was he whom I meant to slay in the recess of Westminster Bridge," replied Ernestina. "But it was some other person whom I struck with the sharp dagger; and the image of the countenance upturned towards me at the moment has haunted me ever since. I instituted a secret inquiry in the neighbourhood, and succeeded in learning that the young man was not killed by the blow, but was removed to a doctor's and subsequently recovered. That is all I know relative to the poor young man: for neither could I prosecute my inquiries openly or fully, nor would the doctor's servants give much information upon the matter. There seemed altogether to be some mystery attendant upon the very presence of that young man in the recess——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Prince; "we need not talk longer than is necessary on that painful topic. Suffice it for you to know that the young man did recover, and that therefore no weight need lie upon your conscience. Tell me then, wherefore have you been absenting yourself from London?—why have you been living in that seclusion to which you refer in your letter in so mournful a strain? Are you afraid of continued persecutions from that villain?"

"Such is indeed my constant terror," replied Ernestina. "You know the monstrous proposition he made to me: and you are well aware that he is capable of backing any such proposal by the most dreadful threats. I am afraid of him—Oh! I am afraid of him—and it was to implore your advice, even your intervention, in this matter that I resolved to present myself to you to-night."

"Most welcome are you, dear Ernestina. But tell me how I can serve you—what you wish me to do?"

"My object is," she answered, "to be enabled to quit that rural solitude in which I have been burying myself, and return to London to take up my abode at my uncle's house. But this I dare not do, unless relieved from all apprehension on account of Daniel Coffin. For common decency's sake I ought still to be arrayed in widows' weeds——"

"You look better as you are, dearest."

"Perhaps: but if I do settle again in London, I must resume my mourning apparel until the prescribed period for such weeds expires. If I allude to this subject of dress at all, it is only to show you that such is the terror in which I stand with regard to the Public Executioner, that I dared not visit London save in a dress which serves as a disguise."

"But let us see what are the sources of all this terror," observed the Prince; "so that I may better understand what I can do for you. In the first place the scoundrel dares not breathe a word relative to the part which we induced him to play in smoothing the road of your husband out of this world; because, were he to tell all he knows of this circumstance, no one would believe him—not a soul would credit the assertion that I had lent myself to such a scheme."

"Be it as you say," returned Ernestina. "But then," she added hesitatingly, "does he not know

that I attempted the life of some one on the bridge that night? That he was there on the occasion I know; for I saw him; and from the little I succeeded in gleaning from the servants at the doctor's house, there was a man answering his description who helped to bear the wounded youth thither."

"Well, but has not the affair all blown over?" asked the Prince, of course not choosing to reveal how much he had to do with that night's transaction. "Besides, how could Coffin possibly prove that you were the authoress of the deed?—and even if he could, what earthly reason should he have for bringing before a court of justice an affair wherein he himself would have to give some curious explanations? Indeed, was he himself there for any good purpose, I wonder?"

"I admit that it is not reasonable to suppose that he would deliberately drag all these things to light," said Ernestina. "But nevertheless, I live in mortal terror of that man! When he threatens me in his own horrid manner, he excites me so dreadfully that I have not presence of mind to reason whether he will be likely to fulfil his threats or not: but I yield entirely to their influence. I cannot help it—for methinks at the time that in bis rage or malignity, he is quite capable of exposing everything, even though at the risk of compromising himself. In a word, I dare not—no, I dare not appear openly again in the world of London, if that man remains at large with the power to thrust himself upon me, force his way into my presence, intimidate me with threats, or even perhaps make me the victim of brutal violence! *This*, then, is my position, and it drives me to despair. I thought of getting my uncle the Marquis to negotiate with Coffin; so that for a given sum of money, or an annual pension, he should undertake to leave me free of molestation for evermore. But there is no reliance to be placed on the fellow's word; and indeed I should live in constant terror."

"Well, the position *is* too awkward, I must admit," said the Prince: "and to speak candidly, my dear Ernestina, I sometime ago had the intention of packing the fellow off to the Colonies, or getting rid of him in some way or another. But all the startling events which have since occurred—Bonaparte's return to France, his preparations for war, and his defeat the other day at Waterloo—all these matters have kept me in such a constant state of excitement, that I really have altogether lost sight of that scoundrel Coffin until now."

"And *now*, therefore," exclaimed Ernestina, taking up the Prince's last word, "you will carry your original intention out—will you not? Say, dearest Prince, for my sake——"

"Yes—anything for your sake, dear, dear Ernestina," he replied, winding his arms around her neck and straining her to his breast.

"Tell me then—tell me what you will do," she murmured; "so that I may know upon what I may rely and judge how I may act. For believe me, dearest Prince—Oh! believe me when I assure you that I can not—will not return into that rural solitude whence I have now emerged. On the contrary, if I thought that within a few days you would get rid of Coffin for me—for *that*, in a word, is what I desire and the favour I came to ask of you—I would return secretly to my uncle's house in Albemarle Street, and there remain until I learnt from you that my enemy had been disposed of."

"Do so—do so, dearest Ernestina," rejoined the Prince. "When we part presently, hie you home again to Leveson House; and within a few days—so soon as I can arrange some suitable plan—Coffin shall be packed out of the country. Then, the moment this is accomplished, I will come myself to Leveson House to acquaint you with what I have done; and perhaps, Ernestina, we may visit together those secret apartments——"

"Yes—anywhere with you, dear George," replied the unprincipled woman, but as splendidly beautiful as she was dissolute: and as she spoke, she fixed upon the Prince a look all burning with desire—while the expression of her countenance, flushing and glowing, was so full of wantonness that his own passions were now excited to a maddening degree.

Here, however, we may close our description of this interview—merely observing that it was midnight ere Lady Ernestina Dysart, once more enveloped in her light but ample cloak, and with the dark veil drawn down over her features, issued forth again from the private door of Carlton House.

Then did the Prince Regent return to the brilliantly lighted saloons where all the *elite* of the Aristocracy and Fashion were gathered together, under the auspices of the magnificent Lady Sackville. It was one of a series of entertainments given to celebrate the Battle of Waterloo, the tidings of which tremendous victory had reached England three weeks previously. Alas! how little were the real consequences of that battle understood—or rather how much were they mistaken—by the immense majority of the British people!

However, not to pause for the purpose of political disquisition, let us proceed to remark that this was altogether the most brilliant festival which Lord and Lady Sackville had given since their installation at Carlton House. Of all the galaxy of loveliness we must especially notice a group of beautiful girls gathered in one corner of the principal saloon, and whose bewitching charms when thus combined, irresistibly conjured up the idea of a nosegay of the choicest and most exquisite flowers. Elegantly dressed, in a manner evincing the most refined taste and the best calculated to set off their respective styles of beauty each to the fullest advantage,—they had likewise an air of virginal freshness and girlish artlessness about them which gave to this group an undefinable charm. To gaze upon those lovely creatures, it would appear a pity indeed that they had ever been introduced into the heated atmosphere of a Court life. The closest observer of human nature would not only have guaranteed the virtue of those damsels, but would have beheld in the innocence of their looks and the girlish gaietics of their manners the sign and pledge of their purity. They were not sisters—were not in any way related to each other—but were merely friends, linked however in the closest bond which intimacy can possibly weave: for *a secret* existed amongst them—a secret which was the common property of that sweet group, and which they would not for worlds reveal!

They were the daughters of some of the proudest families of the Aristocracy. Two of them were engaged to be married to young noblemen of high rank, great wealth, and handsome persons; and the others felt equally certain of forming alliances

quite as eligible. For their extreme beauty, their accomplishments, and their fascinations, as well as their exalted birth and the influence of the families to which they belonged, had already rendered them the objects of tender regard on the part of many suitors.

But if this charming bevy had now contrived to group itself apart from the rest of the brilliant company, and thus retire into a corner to exchange a few words with each other, it was only for a brief space—and in less than five minutes would they be sought for by the gallants who had engaged them as partners for the next dance.

But who were these charming creatures, forming the little group apart from the rest of the assemblage—this perfect nosegay of the sweetest flowers to which we have thus directed such special attention? These fair ones were the same who now and then secretly visited Carlton House, joined in a voluptuous dance for the amusement of the Prince, and were in reality upon terms of the utmost familiarity with him! *This* was the secret which we have above alluded to as being common amongst them: it was the link binding them together in so close an intimacy. Their purity was gone—their chastity existed not: lovely as they were to the eye, they were naught but pollution beneath the surface! That virginal air which seemed to invest them as with a charm, was the mere artificial assumption of what was no longer natural. They were already on the high road to become Messalinas of depravity!

And so it is with many—alas! too many, of the daughters of the Aristocracy. Their very breeding, their rearing, their training gradually adapt them to all possible vices and hypocrisies. The routine of the fashionable boarding-school is a fitting preparative for the more prurient developments to be evoked by the warmth of the atmosphere of pleasure and fashion. How is it possible that girlish artlessness can survive in such a heated air as this? The freshness of the rose languishes and fades in the sickly atmosphere of drawing rooms. So it is with the daughters of the Aristocracy. We do not say with *all*—but with many, too many; and the virtuous ones prove the exceptions to the rule, and not the rule itself. How otherwise can we account for the fearful demoralization, the inveterate depravity, and the transcending dissoluteness which characterize the married life of the upper classes? The women of that sphere do not put on habits of profligacy at the same time with the bridal garments. No—before they even accompany their husbands to the matrimonial altar, they have in many cases already strayed out of the paths of virtue. Hence is it that their progress in vice continues with such an apparently easy and almost natural gradation, down the inclined plane leading to utter dissoluteness.

Reader, this picture of the females of the Aristocracy is not too highly coloured—no, nor a whit exaggerated. Ten thousand facts might be brought forward to testify its truth.

CHAPTER CLXXI.

WATCHINGS AND PURSUITS.

RETURN we now to Valentine Malvern, whom we left in Pall Mall after he had despatched the ill-looking fellow to fetch Mr. Lawrence Sampson.

No sooner had he thus sent off the messenger whom hazard threw in his way, when he began walking about in such a manner as to avoid exciting suspicion that he was in wait for any body, but so that he could not fail to observe whomsoever might turn into the carriage-way leading down to the private door of Carlton House. Not long had he thus waited when he beheld a lady advancing rapidly. She was closely veiled and wrapped in a cloak of light material and elegant make; and she at once turned towards the private door. A cold shudder passed through Malvern's frame as he thought to himself it was possible—nay, even probable—that this female who had just passed him by, was either the murderess of his father, or was in some way connected with that sire's mystic disappearance.

Having waited for three or four minutes, so as to allow the lady full time to enter the palace, Valentine proceeded to examine the immediate vicinage of the private door with a close scrutiny; and having done so, he found that there was no other path to reach it save the carriage-way leading out of Pall Mall. It was therefore certain that by the same avenue the lady approached Carlton House, must she come forth again—unless indeed the Prince caused her to be escorted out by any other door, which was not at all likely, seeing that the circumstances of her visit indicated her desire that it should be as private as possible.

Having inspected the premises, as just stated, Malvern resumed his walk to and fro in that part of Pall Mall; and as it was the place of resort for evening loungers in those times as well as at the present day, his prolonged presence there attracted no particular notice. Many and conflicting were the thoughts that passed through his mind: his interview with the Prince—all that he had heard relative to his well-beloved Florence Eaton—then his meeting with Venetia—but chiefly of all, the singularity of that coincidence which on the very day that he had refreshed his memory as it were with an examination of the unknown lady's writing at Lawrence Sampson's, should have thrown in his way another specimen of her penmanship at a time and in a place at which he should least have sought for it,—these were the varied topics of his reflections.

In about a quarter of an hour more Larry Sampson made his appearance; and at once accosting the young gentleman, he said, "Well, sir—what has happened? I presume accident has given you some clue——"

"Yes—otherwise I should not have sent thus hurriedly for you," replied Valentine. "In a word, the whole affair now assumes a most delicate, and indeed difficult aspect."

"How so?" asked Sampson. "Tell me everything in a few words; because I have then got something to tell you—but not of any material consequences. And now proceed, sir."

"In a word, then, you must know," continued

Valentine, "that I had occasion to call this evening, relative to certain business, upon his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. I was shown to a private room; and there I found the fragment of a letter in the same handwriting as the one which I discovered amongst my father's papers and which is now in your possession. A portion of the letter—indeed that portion which would have contained the signature—was torn away. But all that remained did I read. The writer of that letter is on terms of great intimacy—I should say the fullest intimacy—with his Royal Highness. She says she is leading a retired life, which is perfectly miserable and which she can endure no longer. She makes an appointment to call upon his Royal Highness this evening at ten o'clock, in order to explain to him wherefore she has gone into seclusion; unless, indeed, as she says, he is already acquainted with the circumstances. Such is the substance of the letter. Accordingly, on issuing forth from Carlton House, I seized upon the first person I saw likely to run upon a message and hurried him off to you."

"You did wisely, sir, in thus sending for me," observed Sampson. "But the lady?"

"I have every reason to believe she is at this moment in Carlton House," responded Valentine. "A few minutes after ten a lady of middle height, enveloped in a cloak, and with a veil entirely concealing her countenance, turned up this avenue here and passed on to the private door. That she *is* a lady so far as her station of life is concerned, is beyond all doubt. Her gait—her walk—the tastefulness of her apparel, of which I could see enough by the lamp-light as she passed me by—all prove that she is of quality and station—I am almost inclined to think *of rank*."

"And she is there now?" observed Sampson inquiringly.

"She is there now," answered Malvern. "Since

she is very intimate with the Prince and may have a long story to tell him, as well as a great deal to consult him about, it is probable her interview will be somewhat lengthy."

"Well, sir," remarked Sampson, "as you observe, the thing is altogether delicate and difficult—seeing that the lady, whoever she may be, is on such intimate terms with His Royal Highness. But we must endeavour to find out *who she is*, and then make inquiries as to her private life, her pursuits, and so forth. While this is being done, she must not be lost sight of, but shall be watched day and night,—all her movements followed—every step dogged. This is the course to be adopted, and the only one."

"I agree with you fully," answered Malvern. "Of course it will be impossible to arrest the lady on such meagre evidence as we now possess——"

"Besides, after all," interrupted Sampson, "it does not necessarily follow that because she was engaged in an intrigue with your father, she must have made away with him—although what little we know relative to her true character is certainly calculated to produce no very favourable impression."

"Assuredly not," observed Malvern. "And I know not how to account for it—unless by the belief that this woman, if not the actual murderess of my sire, is at all events privy to the circumstances of his disappearance—but as she passed me ere now, a cold shudder, like a feeling of superstitious awe, seized upon me——"

"The imagination will do that, sir," observed Mr. Lawrence Sampson, coolly; for being a very matter-of-fact man, he had not much faith in such metaphysical evidences as that to which Valentine was alluding; indeed Larry considered one good living breathing witness in human shape to be worth all the secret presentiments, shudders, tremors, or quiverings in the world.

"You observed ere now that you had something to tell me," remarked Malvern.

"Yes," exclaimed Sampson, now recollecting the circumstance. "Do you, by any accident, happen to have a suspicion of who the man was that you sent with the message to bring me hither?"

"I have not an idea," said Malvern, surprised at the question: for the individual alluded to was a perfect stranger to him.

"That man," continued Larry, "is a notorious person in his way, and as desperate a character as ever lived. He has escaped from my clutches *once*: but I think that before long he will get himself into a scrape again—and next time I shall take very good care he does not escape."

"But to whom do you allude?" asked Valentine, with increased surprise.

"Ah! pardon me, sir, for inflicting my comments upon you," exclaimed Sampson. "That man whom you sent to me just now, and of whom we are speaking, is Daniel Coffin the Public Executioner!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Malvern: for even with a person of the strongest mind there may be something to shock or startle in such an announcement as this. "By the bye, I told him to come back and I would give him another guinea——"

"Which he has taken very good care to do," observed Sampson. "He assured he was to come back again to receive the extra fee. I offered to give it him, in order, as I said, to save him the trouble of retracing his steps—but really and truly to save you, sir, from being again brought in contact with such a fellow. But he said he was determined to come himself, as he thought it would be better."

"Where is he?" asked Malvern.

"There," returned Sampson, pointing across Pall Mall to a dark figure lounging to and fro on the other side.

"Go and give him the promised guinea," said Malvern; "and dismiss him at once."

Sampson accordingly traversed the street, and accosting the Hangman, put the money into his hand, saying, "There! I told you there would be no further need of your services. You can go your ways now."

"One word," said Coffin. "That's the Mr. Malvern whose father disappeared in such a queer way about a year ago—isn't it?"

"Yes," replied Sampson. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh! only just for curiosity's sake," returned Coffin. "Good night, Mr. Sampson:"—and he walked away.

But the Hangman did not really disappear from the scene. He saw that something was going on, and he was resolved to watch from a distance. Accordingly, after pretending to tramp away, he returned just so far as to be able to see everything without being seen: for not only was he impelled by a certain curiosity to penetrate into anything which appeared mysterious, but he likewise entertained so cordial a hatred for Larry Sampson that he would go many miles out of his way to do him an injury when it could be inflicted without fear of a rebound.

On rejoining Valentine Malvern, the Bow Street officer said, "I do not think it is necessary, sir, for you to remain here any longer. On the contrary, it is better that only one person should be seen loitering about here. You can accordingly return home, and I will remain upon the watch. I must get you first, however, to give me as accurate a description as you can of the lady's dress, so that I may not possibly make any mistake; and I must likewise ask you to have the goodness to take a hackney-coach and go round by the Bow Street watch-house, to deliver a little message for me."

Malvern at once gave the required description of the dress as well as he had been enabled to distinguish it by the uncertain light prevailing in the street at that hour; and he then intimated his readiness to convey any message Sampson might have to send to Bow Street.

"Be so kind then, sir, to go to the watch-house there, and say that Mr. Sampson wants one of his men to be sent down to Pall Mall directly. Just please to hint that it's to keep a look-out on a house that I want a man for; and they will arrange at the watch-house accordingly."

Malvern promised to deliver this message and then observed that he should like to see Sampson again that night, to learn his success in tracing the lady to her abode wherever it might be, and discovering who she was.

"I can well understand your anxiety, sir, in this respect," replied Sampson; "and if you will sit up for me I will be sure to call upon you—no matter at what hour—in order to report the result of the adventure."

Malvern then hurried away; and having visited the watch-house in Bow Street to deliver Sampson's message, he proceeded straight home to his mansion in Hanover Square.

The Bow Street officer lounged about in Pall Mall; and in about twenty minutes a wretched-looking object, clothed in rags, and carrying a bundle of matches, came crawling along the pavement. But the moment he observed Sampson, signs of intelligence passed between them, quick as thought; and the wretched-looking mendicant, immediately crossing Pall Mall, threw himself down on a door-step opposite to where Sampson was walking about. For this seeming beggar was none other than one of the Bow Street officer's most active and intelligent men, and who had come down thus disguised in consequence of the message delivered by Valentine Malvern.

As the reader is already aware, it was nearly twelve o'clock before Lady Ernestina Dysart issued forth again from Carlton House. When she did thus emerge once more after her long and amourous interview with the Prince Regent, she had her veil drawn in thick folds over her countenance, and her cloak wrapped around her, so that it was impossible even for her own brother, had he been there at the time, to have recognized her. Neither did Larry Sampson: but he *did* at once know that it was the same whose dress Valentine had described to him; and he accordingly followed her at such a distance that without approaching near enough to excite her attention, he never once lost her from his view as she passed through St. James's Square up into Piccadilly, and thence into Albemarle Street. Great now was the astonishment of Mr. Sampson when he perceived that she stopped and knocked at the door of the Marquis of Leveson's house. But perhaps never in all his lifetime had his wonderment been excited to so high a pitch, as it was when he obtained a glimpse of her countenance as she threw up her veil upon entering the hall. This glimpse he caught at the moment ere the porter closed the front door again;—and by the powerful light which blazed inside the palatial mansion and streamed indeed through the open portals into the street, did the Bow Street officer recognize the splendid countenance of Lady Ernestina Dysart.

The front door was closed again, and the flood of lustre which had poured forth was now only seen through the hall windows: but still the Bow Street officer stood on the opposite side of the way, transfixed as it were to the pavement, and with his looks rivetted upon that portal which had just shut Lady Ernestina from his view. But from this reverie of astonishment he was speedily aroused by somebody brushing against him: and looking round, he beheld his underling who was disguised as a beggar.

"You know Lady Ernestina Dysart by sight?" said Lawrence Sampson to his man. "You saw her once at Newgate when she went to visit her husband. Keep a watch on her—follow her wherever she goes—it is of the utmost importance! You shall be relieved to-morrow morning about the usual time."

Larry then hastened away, and took the shortest cut to Hanover Square. Valentine Malvern was anxiously expecting him; and the moment the Bow Street officer was shown into his presence, he saw by his countenance that he had some important communication to make.

"Well, you have traced the lady to her dwelling?" exclaimed the young gentleman. "Where does she live? and who is she?"

"She lives at Leveson House," answered Larry Sampson; "and she is Lady Ernestina Dysart, the Marquis's niece!"

"Good heavens! what do you tell me?" exclaimed Malvern. "If this be the case, what are we to surmise? A perfect horror!—that she gave information against her own husband and sent him to the scaffold!"

"Yes—that is positive beyond all doubt," rejoined Sampson: "and if she were capable of such an atrocity, it is by no means improbable that she has perpetrated even more flagrant enormities. But we can neither do nor say more at present. I must not only think over the matter seriously, but likewise institute the most searching inquiries into her past life. Ah!" suddenly ejaculated the officer, as an idea struck him while turning to leave the room; "this accounts for her keeping the letter which I took her to Leveson House when making the inquiry on your account many months ago. It was her own letter—the anonymous one she had written to the magistrate, giving the information that placed her husband in the grasp of justice. I am afraid she is a bad one—a very, very bad one."

And with these words Mr. Lawrence Sampson took his departure, leaving Valentine Malvern to meditate upon the extraordinary discovery which had this night been brought about.

But in the meantime what had Daniel Coffin, the Public Executioner, been doing? From his hiding-place in Pall Mall he also had seen the veiled and cloaked lady issue forth from the avenue leading down to the private door of Carlton House; and he at once observed that she became the object of Lawrence Sampson's pursuit. The beggar—or rather the disguised officer—was also following at a distance; and Coffin having noticed the evident intelligence which existed between the two, had no difficulty in comprehending at once that this seeming mendicant was in reality an agent of the police. The Hangman had therefore a difficult course to steer: for he also had his own reasons for wishing to see what was going on—and he was equally anxious to escape observation. He accordingly proceeded in such a way as to keep the lady, Sampson, and the disguised beggar, all three in sight at the same time, while he continued to remain unseen by all. In this manner was the vicinage of Albemarle Street reached; and as soon as the lady turned up that thoroughfare, the Hangman muttered to himself, "Ah! well, now I know who she is for a million: and, by Satan! it must be just as I thought. Young Malvern is after her: they have somehow or other got on the right scent——But what's the use of my standing chaffing with myself here? I must to business!"

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Meanwhile Lady Ernestina Dysart, having entered Leveson House in the manner already described, learnt that her uncle the Marquis was entertaining a select circle to celebrate the recent victory in Belgium; and as a matter of course the domestics at once proposed to acquaint his lordship with Lady Ernestina's return. But she desired them not to do so. She was wearied: she

moreover was not in mourning, and could not therefore be seen by any of her uncle's guests;—and she was also anxious to pass the next few days in as much privacy as possible, for reasons already explained. She therefore bade one of the servants serve her up some supper in a retired parlour; and when she had partaken of refreshments, she hastened up to her bed-chamber, which was always kept ready for her reception.

Upon entering this room from which she had been absent for several months, she experienced a comfort and consolation such as one feels when meeting with old and familiar friends. Hastily dismissing the maid, with whose services she dispensed on the present occasion—for she wished to be alone so as to commune with her own thoughts—Lady Ernestina locked the door, laid aside her bonnet and cloak, and began to disapparel herself.

Standing before the glass, Ernestina let loose all the luxuriance of her light brown hair, which she began to comb out. The mirror reflected her exquisite form about which the unfastened drapery now fell with a kind of classic air: her splendid bust was exposed in all its dazzling whiteness and rich exuberance; and as her head was partially thrown back, while she combed out the long masses of her shining hair, her countenance caught the light of the wax-tapers with a Rembrandt effect. On her cheeks there was a deepening of the carnation hue as she thought of the latter portion of her interview with His Royal Highness: and knowing that she was beautiful—aware also that she was admired—with true patrician profligacy did she feel a thrill of pride on account of being the paramour of Royalty; so that while the glow gently suffused her cheeks, the light of satisfaction flashed from her fine dark eyes.

But heavens! all in an instant, while thus surveying herself in the mirror, she beheld another face—a hideous one—in horrible contrast with her own: and springing round with a fearful start and a suppressed shriek, she became paralysed with horror on finding herself confronted by the terrible Hangman.

CHAPTER CLXXII.

THE PUBLIC EXECUTIONER AND THE PATRICIAN LADY ONCE MORE.

For nearly a minute did Daniel Coffin in silence survey, with devouring eyes and gloating looks, the splendid woman who thus stood before him in all the voluptuous undress of the hour and the occasion. The fellow, who, monster of ugliness though he were, was nevertheless insatiate in his desires and furious in his passions, felt the blood coursing like lightning through his veins; and he inwardly resolved to make that charming creature his own ere he was half-an-hour older, no matter what the consequences might be!

During the minute that he thus stood gazing upon her, Lady Ernestina herself was so stupified with ineffable horror—so completely a prey to a fearful consternation—that she remained motionless and statue-like, not having even the thought to draw the loose drapery over the bosom on which the ruffian's eyes were fixed so gloatingly. But suddenly starting from that state of petrifaction, she sprang towards the bell-rope. Coffin however intercepted her more quickly still; and winding his arms around her half-undraped form, he strained her in his loathsome embrace, at the same time muttering the most awful threats if she dared cry out.

"For God's sake release me!" said the wretched woman, scarcely able to articulate the words: for the reader may rest assured that it was not through the Hangman's menaces that she failed to give vent to rending shrieks and piercing screams, but simply because the direst horror had almost completely subdued every faculty.

"Release you!—yes, but only for a minute or so," said the Hangman, "that we may have a quiet chat and get a little cool upon the matter, so as to understand each other better than we have ever done yet."

Thus speaking, he deposited the half-fainting lady upon a chair; and seating himself in another opposite to her, he again surveyed her with all the devouring intensity of one who feels assured of possessing the object of his desire, and experiences a delight in feasting his imagination with those joys the reality of which he is about to make his own.

"Why do you persecute me thus?" demanded Lady Ernestina, now rapidly recovering, if not exactly her presence of mind, at all events a dread consciousness of the horrors of her position, together with a keen appreciation of the necessity of doing something to avert the hideous catastrophe with which she was threatened. "Tell me—why do you pursue me thus? You must have watched me—you must have dogged me—— Why, why, do you do it?"—and with nervous quickness did she cover her bosom and draw all her loosened raiment around her.

"When you come to hear all I have got to say," returned Coffin, "you will fall down on your knees and thank me for coming for'ard as a friend at a moment when you stand in such precious need of one."

"What on earth do you mean?" cried the lady, now starting with hysterical affright: for there was ever in her mind at least *one* subject to which all her terrors invariably pointed whenever raised up.

"I mean, my dear creature," answered the Hangman, with brutal familiarity, "that if you don't choose to accept me as a lover, it's deuced likely I shall have the unpleasant task of tucking you up at the Old Bailey."

Lady Ernestina gave a convulsive start, which more resembled the sudden writhing of anguish, as these words smote with awful ominousness upon her ears. She tried to speak, but could not: her feelings choked her—her face was ghastly pale—her lips white as those of death, and quivering fearfully—while her eyes glared in dread consternation upon the Public Executioner.

"Come, come," he said, "there's nothing for you to be annoyed at, if so be you only keep good friends with me: for I *can* save you—and I *will*."

"Save me!—save me from what?" she gasped forth, now partially recovering the faculty of speech.

"Why, in plain terms," rejoined the Hangman, "you have been watched from Carlton House. There's young Malvern and Larry Sampson——"

"Ah!" gasped Lady Ernestina: and she sank back in her chair—not in a fit—not in a state of

unconsciousness,—but in a dismay so tremendous that she felt as if she were passing through the crucifying phases of a hideous dream—a dream too awful to be impressed with reality.

"Don't give way to despair," resumed the Hangman: "'cause why, there's plenty of time, and means too, to escape this danger. But shall I tell you all about it? Well, then—I suppose I had better," he continued, receiving no answer, but observing that the unhappy lady still gazed upon him in a sort of horrible stupor. "You see, I was coming along Pall Mall when a young genelman—a tall and good-looking fellow too—stopped me just by that private avenue leading down to the convenient side-door of Carlton House and thinking that I was some poor devil that would like to earn a guinea—because, you see, it isn't my habit to dress over well except on a Sunday; and then I come out spicy——Well, but this young fellow bids me run and fetch down Larry Sampson; and he tells me that his name is Mr. Valentine Malvern. I thought this looked like an adventure in which I might have a finger; so when I had fetched Larry, I watched at a distance. Young Malvern went away: but soon after Larry was joined by one of his runners, or agents—whatever you choose to call them—in the disguise of a beggar-man. So I was now more convinced than ever that there must be something queer in the wind; and I determined to see what it was. I therefore watched: and, lo and behold, presently out comes a lady cloaked and veiled from the private door of the palace.

"Ah! that was I," ejaculated Ernestina, with a sudden start, as the stupor of consternation quickly left her; and she now became fearfully interested in the tale which the Hangman was telling. "Go on—go on," she cried, trembling visibly from head to foot; and no longer perceiving in that man a hideous monster of whom she was afraid, she now looked upon him as one who held her very life in his hands and who had promised to save her.

"Well, ma'am," he continued, "you was so completely wrapped up, and not being in mourning too, that it never for an instant struck me who you was. So I followed you, because I saw Sampson and the disguised officer following also: but the moment I saw you turn up into Albemarle Street, it flashed to my mind like lightning who you was. I put two and two together, as one may say, all in a moment! For it struck me that as young Malvern's father had disappeared in such a rum way last year, it *must* have been him that I buried down at the Blackheath Villa——"

"My God! my God!" moaned the wretched Lady Ernestina, clasping her hands agonizingly.

"Don't take on like this, I tell you," said the Hangman; "but hear me out first, and then you shall decide what's to be done."

"But if I have been watched—if I am known," now half shrieked forth the miserable lady, suddenly inspired with goading apprehensions of imminent danger, "I must fly—I must speed hence——"

"Nonsense, I tell you! Sit quiet," exclaimed the Hangman, impatiently: "there's nothing to fear for the present; and if you will only listen to me——"

"Well, well—go on, go on," said Lady Ernestina, in the tremor and flutter of a fearful excitement.

"You see, ma'am," continued Coffin, "it never had struck me before who the gentleman might have been that I buried down at Blackheath nearly a year ago: but just now the truth flashed to my mind like lightning. Why should young Malvern be watching you? and why should Sampson have a finger in the pie? I saw it all in a moment! So thought I, if so be Lady Ernestina only chooses to make herself amiable and agreeable to me, I'll help her out of this trouble. Thereupon I just cast an eye round about the house; and I saw that Larry Sampson was gone, but that the chap disguised as a beggar is keeping watch opposite."

"Heavens! then I am already a captive?" groaned Lady Ernestina, her bosom convulsing with an almost suffocating sigh.

"Oh! but there's more ways of getting out of a house than by the front door," rejoined the Hangman, with a grin: "or else I shouldn't have been able to have got in here at all. Howsomever, when I saw that Larry had gone and his chap was watching opposite, I knew that nothing was to be done, at least for the rest of this night. Oh! I am up to all the dodges of them Bow Street fellows! I suppose they have got a clue to your ladyship somehow or another; but it isn't quite strong enough yet to warrant Larry to take you up—or else he's got others to consult."

"But do you believe it possible that the officers of justice would dare arrest me, the Marquis of Leveson's niece—the friend of the Prince Regent?"—and as Lady Ernestina thus spoke, a look of mingled assurance and hauteur glowed upon her countenance.

"Arrest you, my dear creature!" cried the Hangman, with a sort of compassionate familiarity: "Larry Sampson would as soon arrest you as any body else. Didn't he take your husband without pity or remorse?"

"True!" murmured the lady in a faint tone: "that dreadful Bow Street officer would arrest his own father or mother if what he calls his *duty* enjoined him! But what is to be done? what advice can you give me?" she asked, a sudden wildness displaying itself in her features.

"There's only one thing to do—and that is to escape," replied Daniel Coffin.

"Escape!" echoed the lady, starting from her chair. "Yes—let us escape at once!"

"No—not at once," was the Hangman's quick response. "We must wait till the house is all quiet."

"How did you penetrate hither?" demanded Lady Ernestina abruptly.

"By the back way," returned the Hangman. "There's an empty house a little higher up; and so I went quietly through that, and then crept along the yard-walls till I got into the yard belonging to *this* house. Once there, it wasn't difficult for a genelman like me to insinuate himself inside;"—and thus speaking, Coffin displayed the small crow-bar and bunch of skeleton keys which he almost invariably carried about in the capacious pocket of his greasy fustian coat.

"And you would have me escape by that same way?" cried Lady Ernestina: "climbing over walls——"

"By Satan, ma'am! there's no other way for you," interrupted Coffin: "because Sampson's runner is keeping a close watch in the street; and

depend upon it, if you attempt to leave by the front door, he will pounce upon you at once."

"Good heavens! what *is* to be done?" said Ernestina, wringing her hands: then rising from her seat, she began pacing nervously to and fro. "I must see my uncle—I must tell him everything! Or stay—I will be off to the palace and crave the protection of the Prince Regent——"

"All the uncles and Prince Regents in the world," interjected the Hangman, in his coarse rough voice, "will not prevent Larry Sampson from doing his duty. The best thing you can do, ma'am, is to escape with me in an hour or so—come to my house and stay quiet there till the next night—when you can get off to Dover, and so across to France."

"Yes—there is no alternative," moaned the wretched Ernestina: but then, as a withering, blighting reflection flashed through her brain, reminding her of the price which the Hangman, by the very gloating looks which he fixed upon her, was about to demand for his services, she reeled—staggered back against the couch—and would have fallen had she not clung to the bed-posts for support. "No, no, no!" she murmured with a convulsive shuddering: "anything sooner than *that!*"

"Oh! very good, ma'am," said the Public Executioner, perfectly understanding what was passing in her mind: "then I see that my presence here is of no use—so I'll just take myself off, dropping a hint to the police-runner in the street that if he wants to prevent your ladyship from escaping he had better come in boldly and arrest you at once."

Thus speaking, Daniel Coffin moved towards the door: but Ernestina bounded after him and caught him by the arm, saying in a thick husky voice, "No—you will not precipitate my ruin!"

"Come now," resumed the Hangman, turning back from the door and fixing his eyes with devouring regards upon the trembling, agitated, almost sinking form of the lady who stood before him, the object of ineffable wretchedness; "let us have no more nonsense of any kind. Considering the past, you ought to be uncommon obliged to me for coming to do you a favour now—'cause why, I hav'n't forgot the precious slippery trick you meant to play me on Westminster Bridge that night——"

"Ah!" moaned Lady Ernestina, shuddering more convulsively and more visibly than before.

"Yes—you may well be sorry for that business, because it was a deuced bad piece of treachery on your part. No doubt you meant to stick that dagger into me——"

"My God; what will become of me?"—and with a subdued half-stifled shriek Lady Ernestina pressed her hands to her throbbing brows; for she felt as if her senses were abandoning her.

"An hour in your arms, and I will save you!" said the Hangman in the quick hoarse voice of brutal passion.

"Never, never: I will die first!" exclaimed Ernestina in a wild tone; and she darted frantically towards the bell-rope.

But again did the Public Executioner anticipate the movement: again were his powerful rough arms flung around the beautiful patrician form—and as she felt the shriek which rose to her lips dying unuttered there, she gave a deep moan of despair, and her senses abandoned her.

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When Lady Ernestina Dysart came to herself, she was lying upon the couch, and the Hangman was by her side.

For a few moments she could not believe her eyes: she could not credit the full horror of her thoughts. She pressed her hand to her brow—closed her eyelids tight—then opened them again—and by the light of the tapers burning on the toilette-table, beheld the same hideous reality.

"Eternal God! is it possible?" she murmured, in accents so full of deep, concentrated, indescribable horror, that such a state of feeling seemed to be the prelude to suicide: and again did she cover her eyes with her hands, as if to shut out the tremendous presence of the Hangman.

But we shall not linger upon this scene. We dare not—must not pause to describe the coarse brutality and ribald terms in which the Public Executioner gloated over his victim and made her conscious that all the crowning infamy of her shame had been consummated.

Spirit-broken—feeling herself twenty years older in mind, body, and awful experience than she was an hour back—the miserable, miserable Ernestina dragged herself from the couch; and sitting down upon a chair, she buried her face in her hands and gave way to the mingled horror and anguish of her thoughts. She did not weep; she was even denied the solace of tears. Her eyeballs throbbed, and felt burning in their sockets as if indeed living cinders, red-hot, were there. Excruciating fires were also glowing in her brain: and yet her limbs were cold as ice. She felt as if she were dying—as if all the chords which bound her to existence were giving way—as if life were gradually parting from her!

For three or four minutes did she thus remain rocking herself gently to and fro, as she sat with her elbows resting on her knees and her face buried in her hands. A few low moans bespoke the awful anguish which filled her heart well nigh to bursting. At length she was startled from this awful reverie by a voice which sounded like that of doom upon her ears.

"Come now—don't take on like this——"

"Enough! leave me!" ejaculated Ernestina: and suddenly springing up from her seat, she revealed her frightfully pallid, indeed ghastly countenance to the Hangman, while with the right arm extended she pointed towards the door.

"But you can't escape without me," he observed, though in a hesitating manner; for he was actually frightened at the awful appearance which the outraged woman now presented to his view.

"Escape!" she ejaculated, her lips writhing with ineffable scorn; and at the same time her eyes flashed the lurid light of most hateful defiance: "sooner the scaffold than escape with thee! Begone!"—and with the wildness of a maniac did she continue pointing towards the door.

"I can't and I won't leave you in this scrape," said the Hangman doggedly. "You must come."

"Aye—to be made your mistress!" cried Ernestina, with the intensest, most malignant, most concentrated bitterness alike of voice and manner:

"to be dragged through the mire of all conceivable as well as all inconceivable pollutions—to be besmeared and bespattered with all the filth and feculence of the hideous morass in which you and all your reptile-equals swarm in pestilential existence! No—by heaven, rather the felon's gaol at once, the condemned cell, and all the hideous paraphernalia of the scaffold! What, go away with *you?* place myself still more deeply in *your* power than I already am? No, no—ten thousand times no! Sooner the lazar-house or the lunatic-asylum. And now begone!—I command you to be gone!"

While thus she spoke, her eyes appeared to burn with a living fire, and a fearful expression of mingled hatred and resoluteness was upon her distorting features: so that the Hangman quailed in the presence of that incensed, outraged woman who seemed to have lost all the weakness of her sex and to be animated with the spirit of an avenging fiend.

CHAPTER CLXXIII.

THE SEQUEL.

THE command of Lady Ernestina was peremptory enough for the Hangman to take his departure; but still he moved not. That is to say, though he quailed and even grew afraid in her presence—for there was something terrible in her wrath—yet he did not issue from the room. A sort of unknown fascination kept him there: he felt as if circumstances had now so mixed up her fortunes with his own, that he must not abandon her. Or perhaps in his own savage brutal style, he entertained a fancy—we dare not use the word *affection*—for that splendid patrician creature of whose person he had ere now possessed himself. But whatever the feeling were, certain it is that he lingered in her presence unable to leave, yet not knowing how to propitiate her.

"Do you hear what I have said? and do you mean to obey?" she asked, the words hissing with subdued rage between the portals of those lips which had so recently been polluted by the hot kisses of the ruffian who stood before her.

"The plain truth of it is, ma'am," he answered, "I will *not* leave you. I don't want to have the hanging of such a beautiful creature as you are. You are too handsome to die on the gibbet. My arm has been round your neck; and I should not like to have to put a rope there. Understand me then!—if you stop you will be hanged: your only safety is in flight. Remember, hanging is an awful death——I've seen plenty of it, and should know."

Let the reader conceive what would be his sensation if, for instance, on getting out of bed in the dark he stepped with his bare foot upon a huge snake coiled up in cold, clammy, loathsome folds upon the floor. But if on leaping forward to escape from that snake, another reptile was trodden upon—and then another and another, encountering the bare feet in quick succession, while the individual in frenzied horror was flying towards the door—would not the sensations thus experienced be the realization on earth of some of the most poignant pains characteristic of Satan's kingdom? But not more horrible could such sensations be than those which Lady Ernestina felt crowding one upon another, as the Hangman addressed her in that speech every sentence of which smote her like a fresh outrage or seized upon her like a new anguish. She writhed—Oh! she writhed convulsively; and it was a strong and awful writhing, too, that thus pierced through her graceful, elegant, and voluptuous form. The same effect was visible upon her features; and as the Hangman spoke of her neck which he had encircled with his arm, and which he would willingly save from the contact of a halter, she bit her lip almost till the blood came in order to prevent herself from shrieking out—while the whole aspect of her countenance at that instant showed that a scream was passing behind it.

But all in a moment, when the Hangman had done speaking, a change came over her. It was a change so complete and so abrupt that it could only have arisen from the quick flashing of some new thought to her mind, prompting a change in her plans all in an instant.

"You are sincere in wishing to serve me?" she said in a cold, almost freezing tone.

"I am—on my soul I am!" answered the Hangman, speaking with perhaps more genuine sincerity than ever he had shown in all his life before.

"And you will assist me to escape?"

"Don't I keep on recommending it as much as I can?"

"But I will *not* issue forth by the route you have proposed," said Ernestina in a tone of decision. "I cannot go climbing over walls from yard to yard."

"Then perhaps you know a better way?" rejoined the Hangman inquiringly.

"Yes—there is another means of issue from this house," said Ernestina.

"Well, so much the better. Any way will do if it don't lead into Albemarle Street, where the runner is watching. Come—there is no time to lose."

"It is through the secret apartments that we must proceed," remarked Lady Ernestina; "and thither must we repair with the utmost caution. But it is now two o'clock in the morning: the guests are gone—the house is quiet. One minute, and I shall be prepared to take my departure."

With these words, Lady Ernestina proceeded to arrange her dress, and also to put up the shining masses of her hair. She then resumed her cloak and bonnet: and having listened for a few moments on the landing to convince herself that everything was quiet in the house, she returned to the toilette-table, took up a wax taper in her hand, and beckoning to the Hangman, said "Now come."

Noiselessly did they descend the stairs; and on the landing below Lady Ernestina opened the door leading into the bedroom communicating with the dressing-room whence there was a secret entrance into the private apartments. Traversing this bedchamber—the same which Ariadne Varian had occupied—Ernestina conducted the Hangman into the room containing the mechanical chairs. This place the fellow knew well: for *twice* before had he been in these apartments—once when he was found captive in the chair by Lady Ernestina and the Prince, and the other time when employed by Sir Douglas Huntingdon to aid his scheme in rescuing Venetia from the clutches of the Marquis of Leveson.

"Everything is just the same as when I last saw it," observed Coffin, as on following Ernestina into this room with the mechanical chairs he swept his eyes around. "But which way is it now, my beauty, that we are to go? I hope through the gallery yonder: because I think the mere look of some of the pictures and statues there, would make you love even your humble servant Dan'el Coffin."

"Silence!—no jesting!" cried Lady Ernestina. "There! pass on that way. I follow you."

She did indeed point to the gallery; and Coffin unhesitatingly proceeded towards the door opening into the museum of artistic indelicacies and exquisite immoralities. But just at the very moment that the Hangman was passing by one of the mechanical chairs, Lady Ernestina, dropping the taper, threw herself suddenly upon him, and with one almost superhuman effort flung him as it were into the chair. The sharp clicking noise was heard of the mechanism giving way; and as a terrible imprecation burst from the ruffian's lips, he was caught fast by the arms and shoulders, thus being rendered a captive and powerless all in a moment.

The taper was extinguished—the room had been plunged into pitchy darkness: but Ernestina's laugh of irony and triumph fell like that of a mocking fiend upon the Hangman's ears.

"Come now," he growled savagely: "what's the use of such a scurvy trick as this?"

"The use of it is," responded the lady, in low but measured accents fraught with all the concentration of a fearful vengeance, "to punish you as you deserve for the diabolical outrage you have perpetrated upon me this night. Miscreant, monster that you are! I could have endured—I could even have forgiven, everything but *that*. The very fountains of my existence are now poisoned at their source: the springs of my life are envenomed and corrupted! You have made me feel what it is to be utterly polluted. I am now loathsome to myself: I feel that I have become a mass of moral rottenness. I do not want to live—I cannot live! But ere I die my vengeance must be wreaked upon *you*—a bitter, burning, implacable vengeance, such as can only come from a heart fed with the fires of hell! Such a vengeance is this which I am inflicting upon you! For here will you remain to starve—to perish with hunger, with thirst, and in the exhaustion of frenzied and unavailing efforts to release yourself from that captivity!"

"Devil of a woman that you are! I hate you now," exclaimed Coffin, gnashing his teeth with rage, "as much as I have been loving you."

"Oh! pollute not the sacred name of *love* by breathing it from your toad-like lips!" exclaimed Ernestina, her voice thrilling as if full well calculated to pierce the brain and to bear upon its breath the blight of a withering curse. "Here will you linger for a brief space, enduring all the horrors of starvation—suffering the most torturing cramps in every limb through being retained in one fixed position—and when in your last agonies you implore heaven to send some one to your succour and your prayer remains unheard, then think of the burning coals of torture which you have this night heaped upon the head of Ernestina Dysart!"

There was somethin awful in this foreshadowing of a terrific doom—something appalling to a degree in that avenging voice speaking through the utter darkness which enveloped the man—and speaking likewise such terrible things. The Hangman was struck with dismay: were a light there, he would have been seen sitting aghast, his countenance turned in the direction whence Ernestina's voice appeared to come.

"Miscreant that you are!" she resumed; "I could if I chose gloat my eyes with your dying agonies at once. I might procure a dagger or a knife, and thrust it deep down into that black heart of yours. But no—*that* would be putting you too quickly out of misery. I prefer to leave you to the endurance of all those slow tortures and lingering agonies which I have described—thirst that shall be maddening—hunger that shall make you frenzied and wild!"

"Fiend—devil—demoness!" exclaimed Daniel Coffin, "your hatred and malignity make you insensate! How can all this happen in a house filled with people? Think you that I shall not be able to make myself heard?"

"Know you not," asked Ernestina in a scornful tone, "that these walls beat back every sound which strikes against them? Nothing can penetrate! Oh! scream, roar, yell, howl, and cry—give vent to all the fury of your rage in the voice of a hyæna, or to your savage ferocity in the tones of a tiger: but 'twill have no more effect than a child's whisper in calling succour to your aid."

"Think you, then, that I will not tear away this chair from the floor, or smash this mechanism which now holds me tight?"—and as the Hangman thus spoke in a deep hoarse tone, he strove with a tremendous effort to break the bonds of his captivity.

"Ah! have you succeeded?" said Ernestina in a mocking tone. "No!—toss, writhe, struggle, rage, and convulse as you will, *there* must you remain! And now, good night *for ever!*"

"Murderess, you will yet swing upon the scaffold!" shouted the Hangman in a terrible voice.

But Ernestina gave him no answer; and the next moment he heard the secret door in the wall quickly close—and then all was still. The miscreant was alone; and imprisoned as he was—enveloped too in the deep darkness—he began to shudder lest the avenging lady had indeed prognosticated his doom but too truly.

We must however follow the steps of Lady Ernestina Dysart. Having issued forth from the secret chamber, she did not ascend again into her own bedroom; but proceeding down stairs she noiselessly opened the front door and drawing down her veil, quitted the house. The heaven was still quite dark; but the street lamps at once showed her a tatter-demalion form walking to and fro on the opposite side of the way. The instant however Lady Ernestina sallied forth, the disguised officer turned and stood still for a moment: but he was about to resume his lounging, shuffling walk again, ere following her at a distance, when to his surprise Lady Ernestina crossed over to him and said in a firm voice, "I know who you are—I know what you are here for. I am going to Hanover Square: follow me if you like!"

The officer was certainly taken aback for a moment: but instantaneously recovering himself, he affected not to be able to comprehend what her lady-

ship meant. Not knowing what her object could possibly be, he fancied that this proceeding on her part was a portion of some stratagem, and therefore resolved to act in a way which should give her no opportunity of entrapping him into any revelation or admission that she might be seeking to elicit.

But having addressed him in that manner, Lady Ernestina said no more; and instantaneously turning away, she hurried into Bond Street, and thence by the nearest cut to Hanover Square. Not once did she look behind until she reached the house with No. 20 on the front door: and then, having knocked and rung, she gazed about her. At just a sufficient distance to enable her to distinguish the object by the lamps, but too far off for her to descry its aspect, she beheld a human form; and she felt persuaded that it was the disguised officer who had followed her.

Several minutes elapsed ere any answer was given to her summons: but at length a servant, having evidently huddled on some clothing in great haste, made his appearance.

"Is Mr. Valentine Malvern at home?" asked Lady Ernestina, still keeping the veil over her countenance.

"Yes—he is, ma'am," replied the footman hesitatingly; for he saw enough of the visitant to be assured that she was of lady-like aspect so far as her apparel was concerned. "But at this hour——"

"I am well aware of the strangeness and seeming impropriety of this visit at such an hour," Lady Ernestina hastened to observe. "But it is absolutely necessary I should see Mr. Malvern at once. Tell him," she added in a less decisive tone, "that it is respecting the business which he had in hand with Mr. Sampson this evening—or rather during the earlier part of the night which is now passing."

"Walk in, ma'am," sa the domestic, who, with-

out understanding anything about the business to which Ernestina had alluded, nevertheless saw that her presence there referred to some matter of importance.

He accordingly conducted Lady Dysart into a parlour, where he lighted the candles; and as he quitted the room to report her presence to his master, the very first object on which her eyes settled, as she looked round, was a portrait of the late Sir Archibald Malvern. It had been taken only a few months previous to his death, and was what is usually termed a "speaking likeness." Ernestina felt herself shaken by powerful emotions; for she had loved that man tenderly and well, although with an illicit affection. Yes—and she shuddered, too, with a strong trembling, as all the circumstances of the fearful tragedy which cost him his life were brought vividly back to her memory. Then she fell into a profound reverie, from which she was somewhat abruptly startled in about ten minutes by the entrance of Valentine Malvern.

The young gentleman had not sought his couch when the servant knocked at his door with the intimation that a lady who had given no name, demanded an immediate interview. He had retired to his chamber, it is true—but only to pace to and fro in an uneasy and anxious mood, or else throw himself in an arm-chair and give way to his reflections. When the servant brought that message, a presentiment struck him at the moment that it was Lady Ernestina Dysart who had come to him. She was not only uppermost in his thoughts, but she of all women could *alone* have any reason to seek an interview with him at such an hour, in so urgent a manner, *and relative to the business which he had in hand with Mr. Sampson!* He did not however immediately descend—he had to wait a few minutes to collect his thoughts and make up his mind with what demeanour he should appear in the presence of the woman whom he believed to be the murderess of his father.

Cold and reserved, with a mournful look and slow measured pace, did Valentine advance into that room to which Ernestina had been shown. He was well acquainted with her—he had often met her in society, at the time, too, when she was carrying on that intrigue with his father which he had so little suspected. He therefore now at once recognised her, as she raised her veil on his appearance; and that she had come upon the business which was uppermost in his thoughts—indeed upon the *only* business on which she could possibly visit him at all at such an hour—he immediately perceived by the fixed pallor and altered, careworn look that she wore. For it was a look of that nature which showed that it had only been recently stamped upon the countenance, as if by the effect of some evil intelligence made known within only a few hours past.

"You know wherefore I am here?" said Lady Ernestina, at once addressing Valentine in a tone which, though slightly tremulous, indicated a mind made up for even the most painful ordeal. "But in the name of God, do not believe anything downright outrageous against me! Culpable—very culpable I was: but only as so many women often are——"

"In one word, tell me, Lady Ernestina, is my father dead?" asked Malvern hurriedly.

"O heavens, yes!" she answered, bursting into tears—aye, and it was an unfeigned fit of weeping in which the pent-up feelings of the last two hours now found vent.

"He is dead! Oh! how could I have hoped otherwise?"—and Valentine, averting his countenance, wept: but suddenly turning towards Ernestina, he clutched her by the arm in a paroxysm of uncontrollable feeling, saying, "Tell me how he came by his death?"

"In the endeavour to save my honour," replied Ernestina, now all in a moment wiping away her tears, and speaking with a deep solemnity of voice.

"And—and—you—you did not——"

But young Malvern could not, dared not even, finish the sentence: for he at once saw by the sudden glow which appeared on Ernestina's cheek, the instant before so pale—by the fire flashing from out her large dark eyes—and by the haughty wreathing of her upper lip, how indignantly she resented, depraved though she were, the terrible suspicion implied rather by the look which he had cast upon her than by the few broken words to which he had hesitatingly given utterance.

"Good God! have you indeed suspected me of *this?*" she exclaimed. "But I forgive you—yes, heaven knows that I forgive you: for after all it is to me that you owe the loss of a father! But to suspect me——Ah! I who loved him so well—so fondly—and was beloved so tenderly by him in return!"—and as she spoke, the tears again flowed in a blinding torrent from her eyes.

"Lady Ernestina, 'tis for me to demand pardon of you," said the young man, deeply moved, "if by my suspicions I have injured you."

"Oh! do not for another moment let even your thoughts linger upon such dreadful suspicions!" she exclaimed: then once more wiping her eyes with nervous haste, she took Valentine's hand, led him towards the portrait of the late Sir Archibald, and gazing up towards those eloquent features which seemed to look, to breathe, to speak, and even to smile from the canvass, she said, "Now, in the presence of that life-like counterpart of him whom I loved so well and who is gone—and also before that high attesting heaven which hears me speak—I swear that I am innocent of foul deed or treacherous play towards your father!"

"It is enough, Lady Ernestina Dysart—I believe you—I am satisfied!"—and Valentine's looks bore evidence to the sincerity with which he made these announcements. "Pardon however the curiosity which prompts me at once to beseech a full and complete recital of the circumstances of my father's death!"

"Oh! it is to fulfil this duty that I am come hither now:" and with these words Ernestina proceeded to place herself in a chair so situated that while she was speaking she could still gaze up at the portrait hanging to the wall, as if to prove that she did not fear thus to vindicate herself in the presence of that image of the dead one.

Valentine seated himself near her; and the reader may suppose with what profound attention and all-absorbing interest he listened as Lady Ernestina Dysart detailed the particulars of Sir Archibald's death—how he had concealed himself in the bath where suffocation had deprived him of life!

"Oh! Sir Valentine," exclaimed Lady Dysart, breaking off in the midst of her narrative, "I do not ask you *as a son* to pass a comment upon your sire's conduct; but *as a man* must you experience the loftiest admiration for that noble generosity, that chivalrous magnanimity which kept him silent, placing a seal upon his lips even when feeling the agonies of death gaining upon him! For you understand, Sir Valentine, that it must have been while the boxes and trunks were heaped upon the lid of the bath, that the mortal warnings of asphyxia fastened vulture-like upon your sire; and he knew that if he gave vent to even the slightest moan he would betray me to a furious husband. He died therefore—died to save my honour——O God! how I loved him!"

There was a long pause, during which Valentine Malvern sat weeping. Ernestina shed no more tears: her eyes were hot and dry—her throat was parched—her thoughts were harrowing to a degree; for she reflected that she who had once been worthy of that illimitable love and transcendent devotion on the part of the handsome and high-minded Archibald Malvern, was now a polluted wretch, loathsome to herself, and still reeking from the embraces of the Public Executioner. Oh! she felt that whatever frailties she had been guilty of—whatever crimes she had committed—her punishment had already taken place on earth and had been consummated that night!

After the long pause above noticed, she resumed her narrative, describing how her husband returned from France on a private and hurried visit to England, and how he discovered the corpse at the villa, recognizing its features.

"I need not tell you," she continued, "that on rejoining me in France, he covered me with reproaches. I merited them! But then he brought me to England, and proposed to me dreadful things as the only condition on which he would help to consign the unfortunate tragedy to oblivion. Upon all this I cannot bear to dwell. Suffice it to say that in a grave dug deep in the garden belonging to that villa, do the remains of your father lie; and with him is interred the silken ladder by the aid of which he ascended to my window. Oh! Sir Valentine, if you knew all, you would indeed acknowledge that I have been horribly punished!"

"Unless I believe you to be a veritable fiend in human shape," observed the young baronet in a solemn voice, "I must suppose that the wrongs you experienced at your husband's hands were of no ordinary character: for the proof exists that *you* were the means of surrendering him up to the hands of justice!"

"Ah! the anonymous letter has betrayed *that* circumstance," exclaimed Ernestina: then speaking quickly, she added, "But of all the deeds which stain my life, the conduct I pursued towards my husband is the one calculated to inspire the least remorse. It was a woman's vengeance—and though you will say that the vengeance was terrible, yet was the provocation of no common character."

"Lady Ernestina," said Malvern solemnly, "I am not your judge, and have neither right nor pretence to hold you accountable for actions which concern not myself. Of your behaviour towards your husband we will therefore speak no more. But in this deplorable tragedy involving my father's fate, what course is to be pursued?"

"For my part," at once returned Lady Dysart, in a firm voice, "I have resolved not merely to tell everything, but likewise to dare all consequences."

"How learnt you that suspicions had arisen against you?" asked Malvern.

"I saw that I was watched to-night," replied Lady Ernestina, not choosing to enter into any explanations that should compel her to speak of the Hangman or show that she had any connexion with him. "My fears were excited—I cannot exactly say that conscience troubled me, since whatever share I might have had in your father's fate was unintentional on my part——"

"I believe the explanations you have given me upon that head," rejoined Malvern; "and I can assure you that for more reasons than one I do not wish to give an unnecessary publicity to these details connected with my father's fate. In the first place, I entertain no vindictive feeling towards your ladyship; and I should therefore be sorry to cause an exposure which would produce dishonour or danger of any kind to you. In the second place, I am in duty bound to do all I can to shield my beloved father's memory from reproach; and hence I can have no wish to drag to light an unfortunate amour which would stamp him as the seducer of a friend's wife. Under all these circumstances the matter must be hushed up as far as possible; and we will consult Mr. Sampson upon the subject."

"Be it so," rejoined Ernestina, still speaking with firmness and decision. "Even if be should insist on introducing the whole transaction to the cognizance of the tribunals, I am prepared to undergo whatever punishment may be awarded to me."

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," said the young gentleman, "I have already declared my belief in the truth of your tale: but as a duty towards the memory of my deceased parent, I shall assure myself by means of a surgical examination that circumstances support your statement; and if so, the tribunals would award you but a slight punishment for concealing the death, even if Mr. Sampson should insist upon dragging the transaction before them. But he will not—I am convinced that he will *not*," added Sir Valentine emphatically.

He now looked at his watch, and found that it was nearly four o'clock in the morning.

"I would suggest," he continued, "that we should repair at once to Mr. Sampson's and hear his opinion—but I fear to overtax your energies; for you look ill—you seem as if you had been up all night——"

"Let us go to Mr. Sampson's at once," said Ernestina, rising from her seat and drawing her veil over her countenance.

"Be it so," rejoined Malvern: and they issued forth together.

CHAPTER CLXXIV.

THE DISINTERMENT.

It was between seven and eight o'clock on that same morning, when a hackney-coach drove up to the gate of the villa in the neighbourhood of Blackheath. It was still untenanted, never having been let since occupied by the Dysarts; but Mr. Samp

son, who rode upon the box with the coachman, had obtained the key from the neighbouring house-agent who had the letting of it, under pretence of showing it to some friends in want of a residence in that quarter. The house-agent, happening to be a friend of Sampson's, was easily deterred by some excuse from either accompanying him and his party or sending anybody to show them over the premises.

When the hackney-coach stopped at the gate, Larry Sampson alighted from the box, while Sir Valentine Malvern and two medical gentlemen descended from the interior. The young baronet then assisted Lady Ernestina Dysart to alight; and when Sampson had ordered the hackney-coach to return in three or four hours, the party entered the grounds belonging to the villa. On repairing to the back garden, they found two men with pick-axes, spades, and the necessary implements for opening the grave,—these men having been sent over by Sampson with instructions to climb the wall and wait in the grounds for the arrival of himself and companions.

Sir Valentine Malvern and Lady Ernestina walked first, the medical men and Sampson following at a short distance. Malvern, with the chivalrous feeling of a gentleman towards a lady placed in most painful circumstances, offered Ernestina his arm: but she, with becoming taste, declined the courtesy. She felt how embarrassing it would be for that young man to show an act of friendship towards the woman who, though unintentionally, had been the cause of his sire's premature death.

It was nevertheless with faltering steps that Ernestina advanced towards the spot where she knew the grave to be. She was well nigh exhausted in mind and body, having been up all night, and having passed through so many phases of excitement: indeed she was only now sustained by that species of unnatural energy which arms a person when resolved to carry out a particular proceeding to the end.

Having lived for some time at the villa, she was of course familiar with every spot; and she could not fail to recollect to a nicety where the grave had been hollowed into which she had seen her dead paramour consigned. It is true that all traces of the interment had been completely effaced: but Ernestina was enabled to point to the place where the men were now to dig. They accordingly went to work, one of the medical men remaining as a witness of the proceeding; while Sir Valentine repaired with Ernestina, the other medical gentleman, and Lawrence Sampson, into the villa.

Audible was the fluttering of the lady's heart as she crossed the threshold of the house where the tragedy had taken place. Be it remembered that the establishment was let to the Dysarts ready-furnished; but we must here observe that in consequence of remaining untenanted for some months, the owner had sold off all the furniture, and it was now empty. The bath was however a fixture in the room specially appropriated for the purpose; and there was it found by the party now penetrating to that chamber.

No tears fell from Ernestina's eyes as she gazed upon it: her eyeballs were throbbing and burning as when she left Malvern's abode in Hanover Square. A convulsive gasp however rose up into her throat; and she was compelled to lean against the wall to sustain herself. As for Sir Valentine, he was of course much affected on finding himself in the room where his father had breathed his last, and on beholding that bath in which the catastrophe took place.

Having remained in the chamber for a few minutes, the party descended to the garden again; and Ernestina, retiring to a short distance from the grave, seated herself in an arbour, there to wait the result of the proceedings that were taking place. The other members of the party, who had been with her to the bath-room, gathered round the grave; and in a short time a considerable hollow was dug by the workmen. These men now prosecuted their labours with all befitting caution, so as not to strike their implements into the corpse, which they reached in due course. It was enveloped in a sheet; and the rope-ladder of silken cords was found inside the grave. Thus every detail was precisely as Lady Ernestina had described it; and the dead body was borne into the house.

We shall not endeavour to probe the feelings with which Sir Valentine Malvern gazed upon the decomposing remains of the author of his being. Suffice it to say that he experienced all the grief which an affectionate son was sure to testify on such a solemn as well as sorrowful occasion. He then retired with Larry Sampson, leaving the medical men to perform their examination with a view to ascertain whether the deceased had experienced foul play otherwise than as Lady Ernestina described.

"And so, Mr. Sampson," said Valentine, while walking with the officer through the garden, "you feel that should the surgical report be satisfactory, you will be justified in allowing the matter to be hushed up?"

"Assuredly," answered Sampson. "In consequence of the various representations you have made to me, and with the justness of which I fully concur, I should consider myself to be acting *officiously*, instead of *officially*, in giving publicity to this unfortunate series of events."

"I thank you most sincerely for adopting so considerate and kind a course," said Valentine: then after a brief pause, he added, "Lady Ernestina is to a great extent to be pitied. She evidently loved my poor father dearly!"

"But her conduct towards her husband," observed Larry, "was certainly of the most monstrous description; and when you say that she is to be pitied, I suppose you mean in reference to the sad transactions which we are now investigating, and not in respect to any other matter?"

"Lady Ernestina emphatically stated to me," rejoined Malvern, "that the provocation she had received from her husband was immense; and she as plainly and unreservedly confessed that her's was a woman's vengeance."

"There can be no doubt that Dysart was a man of depraved habits, heartless disposition, and unprincipled character," observed Sampson. "However, with all *that* we have now nothing to do; and if the report of the medical men be such as to bear out her ladyship's statement respecting your father's death, I shall at once tell her that she may consider herself at large again. Hitherto all the circumstances of our investigation corroborate her a lo. There is the bath, evidently convenient

enough for a surprised lover to conceal himself in; and if we only fancy the lid closely pressed down with boxes heaped upon it, it is not astonishing that suffocation should have ensued. Then, too, there is the ladder of silken cords, exhumed with the deceased, and serving as additional testimony to corroborate Lady Ernestina's statements."

In this manner did the Bow-street Officer and Sir Valentine Malvern continue to discourse while walking to and fro in the garden. Presently one of the medical men was seen advancing from the villa; and Lady Ernestina, on perceiving him, at once concluded that the examination was over. She accordingly issued from the arbour and proceeded to join the group. Her countenance was still deadly pale and bore the traces of much internal struggling and over-wrought feeling, as well as great physical depression: but at the same time her demeanour was collected and firm as if she had no fear for the result of the surgical scrutiny.

The medical man had joined Sir Valentine Malvern and Larry Sampson before Ernestina came up with them: but when he observed that she was advancing, he waited until she was present so that she might listen to the report he had to make. He then declared in a solemn manner that from the examination which himself and professional companion had made in respect to the deceased, there was not the slightest ground for questioning the truth of Lady Ernestina's story.

"In that case," said the officer, at once addressing himself to Ernestina, "your ladyship need not consider that I assert any farther claim to your presence here."

"Your ladyship," Sir Valentine Malvern hastened to add, "may take the hackney-coach and return at once to London. I and the others must remain here for a short time in order to adopt measures for the removal of my deceased father's remains in as private a manner as possible from the neighbourhood."

To be brief, Lady Ernestina Dysart took her departure in the hackney-coach; and on her way back to Albemarle Street she congratulated herself upon her presence of mind in adopting the course which she had pursued towards Malvern and which had resulted in her extrication from a most serious dilemma.

But we must still retain the reader's attention at the villa. So soon as Sir Valentine had handed Lady Ernestina into the hackney-coach, he hastened back to rejoin Sampson and the medical man, whom he had left conversing together in the garden. He now found them with the other professional gentleman; and this latter, at once accosting the young baronet, handed him a small pocket-book, which felt damp to the touch.

"Before you offer a word of explanation," said Malvern, in a solemn tone, "I feel assured that you have found *this* about the person of my deceased father. And yet I recognize it not: I do not remember to have observed it in his possession."

"I have just found it," said the medical gentleman, "in a secret pocket in the breast of the deceased's coat. While left alone by my colleague just now, I happened to tread upon the coat, which we had previously taken off, and which lay upon the floor where we performed the examination. Feeling something thicker under the foot than the mere cloth of the coat could be, I had the curiosity to ascertain what it was; and, as I have already explained, in a private pocket I discovered this article. All the other pockets had been rifled: there was not even a ring nor a coin about the person of the deceased."

"Doubtless the money and valuables which might have been about your father at the time," remarked Sampson, "became the perquisites of the individual, whoever it might be, that Dysart engaged to dig the grave."

"The papers which this pocket-book contains," said Valentine, as he opened it, "do not appear to be much injured by the damp. But I will examine them hereafter."

He thereupon secured the pocket-book about his person, and then remunerated the medical gentlemen with becoming liberality for the services they had rendered, and concerning which they were enjoined to the strictest secrecy—enough of the circumstances having been explained to them to show wherefore it was desirable to screen the matter from the public gaze.

They then took their departure; and Sir Valentine remained with Sampson to deliberate upon the course which they should now pursue for the removal of the body.

"If you will leave the management of all this to me," observed Larry, after some discussion, "I will conduct it with the necessary privacy. My two men yonder, who have already filled up the grave, shall remain in charge of the deceased until night; and I will then come myself, with an undertaker on whom I can rely, and fetch away the remains in a coffin. They shall then be borne to your house; and I must leave you to give your dependants and friends what explanation you think fit."

This arrangement was accepted with much gratitude by Sir Valentine Malvern; and taking his departure from the villa, he procured a vehicle at Blackheath to convey him home to Hanover Square.

On arriving at his mansion at about five o'clock in the evening, he at once sent a note to Lord Florimel requesting an immediate call from his lordship; and when the nobleman arrived, Sir Valentine Malvern explained to him all that had taken place. He likewise gave him full particulars of the interview which had occurred with the Prince Regent on the previous evening; and having concluded his narrative, he said, "You must now hasten, my dear Lord Florimel, and make all befitting excuses for my absence this day, from your beloved niece. Tell her that having discovered my father's fate, I now remain at home to mourn in solitude for that death which, though long suspected, has only been proved a certainty within the last few hours. She will appreciate my feelings, and will pardon my absence. Relative to all these details which concern herself, your lordship and your excellent lady will best know how to reveal so important a secret to my adored Florence."

Lord Florimel remained for some little while discoursing with Malvern upon the events which had thus so singularly transpired within the last four-and-twenty hours; and the young baronet could not help observing, as he reflected thereupon,

that it almost seemed as if Providence had chosen to blend the threads of his own destiny with those of Florence Eaton's—for it was on repairing to Carlton House to receive the revelation of a secret so nearly regarding *her*, that he had found in the fragment of a letter the clue to that train of incidents which had so promptly led to the unravelment of the mystery concerning his father's fate. Lord Florimel himself was much struck by the circumstance; and on taking his leave of Malvern, he returned at once to Piccadilly to acquaint Pauline with all that had occurred, preparatory to the same details—or rather, as much of them as it was proper to reveal—should be made known to Florence.

When once more alone, Malvern shut himself up in his own room and examined the contents of that pocket-book which had been found about his father's person. Then was it that with mingled amazement and sorrow he made a *fresh* discovery relative to the past incidents of his sire's career—a discovery concerning matters the bare existence of which Valentine had never even suspected, and which not only regarded himself but also *others!* In a word, a great mystery was now revealed: a secret was disclosed which, but for the discovery of this pocket-book, might for ever have remained buried in darkness. The revelation thus made imposed upon him, too, a duty which he must not postpone an hour longer than was absolutely necessary: in a word, he felt that the moment the funeral was over and his father's remains should have been consigned to consecrated ground, he must lose no time in the accomplishment of this duty to which we allude.

CHAPTER CLXXV.

MORE PEARLS FROM THE STRING.

It was between four and five o'clock on the same day of which we are writing, that a handsome cabriolet, drawn by a splendid horse, dashed up to the front door of Leveson House. Everything was unexceptionable about the appearance of this equipage, save in respect to the groom who stood behind it. It was not that his livery was shabby, or that it was inconsistent with the dashing brilliancy of the "turn-out:" on the contrary, it was as fine as a gold hat-band, a green coat with yellow buttons and plenty of lace, brown knee-breeches, and a new pair of top-boots could possibly combine to render it. But the defect was in the wearer: for most assuredly this groom was of a very singular, awkward, and unprepossessing appearance. He was thin, lank, and lean in person: his gait, so far from having the respectful assurance which characterises a good servant enjoying the confidence of his master, was shuffling and shambling; while his looks were sneaking, downcast, and furtive. Indeed, he looked a veritable starveling, and seemed as if he were some whining wretched mendicant who had been suddenly elevated from rags and the gutter to the full bloom of livery and a stand behind that dashing cabriolet.

When the vehicle stopped at the door of Leveson House, this menial crept down as if he were half frightened lest the equipage should dash off and fling him on the kerbstone, or lest the officers of justice were looking out for him in every direction. Indeed, he seemed altogether out of his element: but it must be likewise observed that his aspect was such as to render it difficult to decide what possible element *could* suit him. Sneaking along from the rear of the vehicle to the horse's head, he so placed himself in the shade of the noble animal as if anxious to make it a screen to hide him from the view of all passers-by: and yet as he held the bridle, a glance of satisfaction twinkled sidelong from his eyes as that look embraced in quick survey all the splendid features of the equipage.

Very different from the menial was the master who emerged from that dashing cabriolet. At the first glance he might have been mistaken for a bear escaped from the Zoological Gardens and dressed up in male attire: for he wore such an enormous quantity of hair about his face as almost to destroy the features that identified him as a human being. His black whiskers stuck out in great bushes—his moustachios were fiercer than any that are ever worn by an actor dressed up to play the part of a Brigand for the stage—his brows were thick and overhanging—he wore an imperial—and his huge whiskers, meeting under the chin, were prolonged into a beard of which a Pasha might have been proud. He was dressed in a semi-military style, but with most outrageous pretentions. His frock-coat was one mass of braiding and frogging all over the breast; and as it was buttoned up to the chin, and therefore covered the waistcoat where the gold chain ought to have been, he wore this said chain outside his coat, a very little pocket being made to hold the watch belonging thereto. This chain was as massive and large as that of a Sheriff or Lord Mayor, and therefore gave its wearer the appearance of uniting some civic dignity with his military rank. His grey trousers had a broad gold stripe down each leg, and were stretched tightly over boots brilliantly polished, with heels two inches high, and furnished with an immense pair of gold spurs.

Such was the phenomenon that emerged in stately grandeur from the cabriolet; and flinging the reins from his lemon-coloured kid gloves—or rather from the hands that wore them—he drew forth an embroidered cambric handkerchief so highly perfumed that it rendered the air fragrant.

"Now, Robin, take care of him," exclaimed Captain Tash, alluding to the horse: "and don't leave his head. Remember how he darted off the day before yesterday and discomfitted the old applewoman's stall. I am just going here to call upon my friend Leveson for a few minutes," continued the Captain, exalting his voice in a bombastic style as some ladies and gentlemen passed by at the moment: "and then we shall drive back to Carlton House. I am engaged to dine with his Royal Highness to-day," he added in a still louder tone, so that the passers-by should not fail to catch the magnificent announcement.

Having thus spoken—while poor Robin looked as if he would have given the world to melt away out of the green livery and top boots and sink into the earth—the redoubtable Captain Tash stalked with an awful swagger into the mansion,

the front door of which was opened by the hall-porter the moment his cab had dashed up to the house. The Marquis was at home: and the Captain was accordingly introduced into a parlour, where he was almost immediately joined by his lordship.

"Sit down, Captain," said Leveson, in an affable manner: for he had good reason to be contented with the way in which the gallant officer had carried out the little commission entrusted to him.

"Devilish hot, to be sure, isn't it, Leveson?' exclaimed Tash, as he flung himself upon a sofa.

The Marquis looked severe for a moment on being addressed thus familiarly; but smiling the next instant at the Captain's impertinence, he said, "Very hot indeed, my dear Tash. What news?"

"Sackville has been going on at a glorious rate within the last two or three weeks," replied the Captain. "He has taken such a fancy for the gaming-table that I could not possibly keep him away from it even if I wished."

"Ah, well," said the Marquis, rubbing his hands gleefully: "so much the better—so much the better. Is he in want of cash again?"

"When I left him half-an-hour back," replied the Captain, "he was just screwing up his courage to go and tell his wife that if he didn't have twenty thousand to-night by eight o'clock he shall be a ruined man."

"Capital—excellent!" exclaimed Leveson, rubbing his hands harder than before, while the supremest satisfaction was expressed in every lineament, line, and wrinkle of his face. "How have you managed this?"

"He has been borrowing money on promissory notes payable at sight, of the fellow who keeps the Golden Hell in St. James's Street: and I'll tell you what I have done," continued Tash with as sly a look as could possibly beam forth from the midst of all the hair that covered his face; "I have made this fellow write him a most peremptory letter, something in this style:—'*My Lord, if your lordship does not pay the nineteen thousand five hundred pounds for which I hold your lordship's* I O U's *by eight o'clock to-night, when the Bank at my establishment opens, I shall be under the necessity of posting your name up in the room, and shall have you put into the* Satirist *and the* Age *next Sunday.*"

"And has this letter really gone?" demanded Leveson, almost in ecstacies of delight.

"By Jupiter! I saw it sent off myself at about two o'clock to Carlton House: and when I went at three to call on Sackville as usual, I pretended to be fearfully indignant on reading the said letter, which he thrust into my hand the moment I entered his room. Lord, how I did swear against that gambling-house keeper! I called him all the 'd——d scoundrels' I could think of; and if oaths were things, and only as heavy as feathers, I am sure I swore enough of them to break a horse's back if they were all collected together and laid upon it. Of course Sackville appealed to me for my advice and assistance. He always does: I have made myself so necessary to him. Well, I assured him that the money *must* be paid; for that the gaming-house keeper was a nasty fellow and would do his worst. Then how was the money to be got? *that* was the next question. Could I raise it on a loan? No: all the money-lenders I am acquainted with had got plenty of his bills already. He walked up and down the room in great agitation, and at length exclaimed, stopping short, '*Come, Tash, I know you must have some sort of advice to give me, if you will.*'—Then I looked very grave, observing that the only thing I could recommend was for him to ask his wife, as she seemed to possess an inexhaustible treasure somewhere or another. '*No, impossible!*' he cried: '*I dare not ask her for any more. Would you believe it,*' he added, '*that the whole amount I have had from her during the last six or seven months has run up to no less than fifty thousand pounds?*'—I expressed my joy that he had a wife who was able to act as his banker to such a glorious extent; but I think he blushed a little and looked rather confused, as if he was not altogether pleased with the allusion. However, immediately recovering himself, he said, '*Well, I suppose I must make up my mind to go and ask Venetia:*'—and your lordship may depend upon it that I urged everything I possibly could in order to make him follow up this resolution. So when I left him just now, he was going to Lady Sackville's boudoir to make known his wants and demand her succour."

"You have managed most admirably, Captain Tash," said the Marquis. "Does Lord Sackville frequently hint at this mysterious source of wealth which his wife possesses?"

"On two or three occasions, when more communicative than at other times," answered the Captain, "he has expressed his wonder where Venetia can possibly get so much money from: and once, when considerably obfuscated with wine—of which he had drunk great quantities in the desperation of a frightful run of ill-luck at the gaming-table—he observed that he knew very well it was not from the Prince she received such vast pecuniary subsidies, as his Royal Highness himself was most frightfully hampered in that respect."

"Ah, well—it matters but little what Sackville says or thinks," observed Lord Leveson in a musing tone: then rising from his chair as a hint to Captain Tash that the present interview need not be prolonged, he presented the gallant officer with a couple of bank notes for a hundred pounds each, saying, "You have played your cards excellently, and I am more than satisfied with all you have done. It is most probable that the necessity will soon cease for you to continue the work of plunging Sackville into these difficulties: ——but, however, I will let you know in due course."

Thereupon Captain Tash took his departure; and as he issued forth from the Marquis of Leveson's house to re-enter his cabriolet, he strode forward with so grand an air, with such a tremendous swagger, and with his immense bell-shaped hat perched in so singular a fashion over his right ear, that he looked not only as if Albemarle Street itself belonged to him, but as if the whole of the West End were his private property.

Immediately after Captain Tash had thus taken his departure, the Marquis of Leveson opened his writing-desk, drew out a private drawer, and proceeded to count the pearls which it contained.

When he had finished, a smile of gloating satisfaction and sensual triumph appeared upon his countenance; and as he locked up the desk again, he said to himself, "She will be mine—she will be mine!"

About an hour afterwards Lady Sackville's carriage dashed up to the house: and the Marquis went forth to the very threshold in order to receive the brilliant Venetia, for whose visit the intelligence he had received from Captain Tash had so fully prepared him. She endeavoured to look as self-possessed and composed as possible; but the keen eye of the Marquis could not fail to observe a deeper shade of seriousness on her countenance than he had ever seen before, and at the same time the glitter of uneasiness in her magnificent eyes. But he appeared not to notice this betrayal of emotion on her part, and with profound respect escorted her into the parlour where he had so recently received the gallant officer.

"I am come to draw upon you again, my noble banker," said Venetia, making a great effort to smile with a sort of dignified good humour; but there was something sickly in it as she drew forth the string whence so many of the pearls had already disappeared.

"I am entirely at your ladyship's service," replied the Marquis of Leveson; "and believe me when I assure you, without flattery, that the happiest moments of my life are those when your ladyship honours me with your presence."

"Perhaps your lordship means to convey a little covert satire in that remark," said Venetia, with a perceptible bitterness in her tone. "You look upon each visit which I thus pay you as a step bringing me nearer and nearer to the catastrophe which you so confidently expect will take place?"

"I hope that your ladyship will acquit me of aught savouring of such rudeness as satire," rejoined the Marquis, with a bow: "for believe me, Lady Sackville, I am incapable of a discourteous act towards you."

"And yet your lordship's antecedents do not altogether justify the remark," exclaimed Venetia, who was in one of those humours which compelled her as it were to vent her spite a little upon the very man on whose purse, if not actual *bounty*, she had come to make a large claim. "However, we will not dispute, my lord," she immediately added, recovering her wonted air of dignity mingled with exquisite politeness. "I am in want of money, and have brought my cheque-book."

With these words she unfastened the string and prepared to take off as many pearls as would represent the sum she needed; while the Marquis of Leveson opened his desk and produced a large bundle of Bank-notes.

"One—two—three"—and thus did Venetia go on counting until she had numbered *twenty:* but when these twenty pearls had been successively drawn off the string, only *one* more remained upon it!

Raising her eyes towards the Marquis, she caught the expression of triumph which had gradually expanded upon his features into actual radiance, as he beheld Venetia detach all those pearls.

"Ah! my lord!" she exclaimed, in a voice thrilling with exultation, "I have still *one* pearl left—and *that* shall never find its way into your hands! Even at the risk of making you repent altogether of your bargain and refuse to honour the demands which these twenty pearls represent, do I promise you that the one remaining here shall never, never depart from me."

"Your ladyship is the mistress to act as you choose," observed Lord Leveson, in a voice of bland politeness: and without even noticing Venetia's allusion to a possible refusal on his part to supply her with any farther funds, he at once proceeded to count down twenty Bank-notes each for a thousand pounds. "I believe that your ladyship will find this sum correct:"—and handing the notes over to her, he waited until she herself had counted them ere he took up a single pearl from the table.

"The sum is correct—and I thank your lordship," said Venetia, in a low and tremulous voice: for the remembrance flashed vividly to her mind at the moment, that of all the *six* who had originally made her the object of their amorous pursuits, *five* had already revelled in her charms, and feeble was now the barrier which separated her from the power of the sixth!

His lordship consigned the pearls to his desk, while Venetia thrust the Bank-notes into her bosom. She then rose and drew down her veil to hide the emotion which she felt that her features were but too likely to betray. The Marquis handed her back to her carriage, which immediately drove off to Carlton House: and on arriving there, Venetia at once repaired to the apartment where her husband was anxiously awaiting her presence.

"There, Horace!" she said, tossing the Bank-notes upon the table with an air so strange that it even resembled a state of mind bordering upon desperation. "This is the sum you require! But understand me well—it is the last I shall be enabled to procure for you."

"My dear Venetia, you are very angry with me—or else you are much annoyed and agitated?" said Horace, approaching her with soothing looks and great kindness of manner.

"No—let us not enter upon any discussion," said Venetia, but still with an uneasy and almost wild look. "Suffice it for you that I have procured the money which is to save you from exposure and ruin: but let me impress it upon your mind, that if you involve yourself in any farther dilemmas, it will be useless to apply to me for the means of extricating you therefrom."

"Tell me, dear Venetia," said Lord Sackville, seized with an irresistible feeling of curiosity, "what is the source of this mysterious wealth of your's? I remember when first you assisted me with money, you led me to believe it emanated from the gifts received from the Prince: but when I reflect upon the very large amounts for which I am indebted to your kindness, I am of course well aware that his Royal Highness has not the means of affording you such supplies. Besides, on *this* occasion, at all events, you have been somewhere to procure the amount now so generously placed at my disposal:"—for Venetia had not laid aside her bonnet and scarf ere rejoining her husband in the parlour where he had been waiting for her.

"Horace," she said, in a low voice, and at the same time fixing upon him a reproachful look,—

"if you have any compunctious feelings as to the mode in which I may have obtained these large supplies with which at different times I have succoured you, surely you should be just if not generous enough to take the full measure of blame unto yourself for those extravagances, vicious pursuits, and inordinate follies which have compelled you thus to appeal to my resources?"

"Good God! what mean you, Venetia?" exclaimed Horace, recoiling from the idea which suddenly smote him as with the blow of a hammer. "Is it possible that you—you——"

And he hesitated—he dared not complete the sentence: but he gazed with a look of mingled agony and shame upon the splendid countenance of his wife—that countenance which the warm blood was now richly suffusing!

"I know what you would say—you would ask me whether I have prostituted myself to obtain these monies?"—and her tone was penetrated with a poignant bitterness. "No, no—it has not come to *that* yet!" she continued, her features suddenly lighting up with a feeling of satisfaction: "but the next time you demand money of me, I must either refuse you—or else——"

"No, no—*that* shall never be!" exclaimed Sackville with a shudder. "All my feelings as a man—as a husband—revolt against such a horror. When our compact was formed—that compact which left us to follow our own inclinations, irrespective of all the ties of love or marriage—it was that we might each pursue that career of fashionable pleasure which may be *depravity* in the true sense of the word, but which at all events should have nothing grovelling, low, and despicably mean about it. In a word, I understood that you might shine as the mistress of the Prince and bestow your favours where the whim or fancy prompted you: but to sell your charms, Venetia——No, no—never, never!"

"Ah! you would not, then, like to know that I became so thoroughly lost to every sense of delicacy as that?" said Venetia, surprised, and not altogether displeased at the vehemence with which her husband had spoken on the point.

"I should hate—I should loathe—I should abominate you!" was the quick reply which Horace gave.

"Then you do still love me a little?" said Venetia, in a tremulous voice.

"Think you that having once loved you so fondly—so devotedly—so enthusiastically," exclaimed Horace, seating himself by the side of his splendid wife and taking her hand, "it is possible to have ceased to love you altogether? No, no: besides which, you are so beautiful—so grandly handsome—it were impossible to help loving you. Ah! if our destiny had been otherwise—if we had been permitted at the time of our marriage to remain in that comparatively humble sphere which was properly our own—we should doubtless have been happier than we are now. At all events, our love would have flowed on like a pure crystal stream that is unpolluted—uncontaminated——"

"Then the splendours, the brilliancies, the pomps, and the honours of a Court life are already losing their attractions for you, Horace?" interrupted Venetia, an ineffable tenderness stealing upon her and melting that heart the chords of which had of late vibrated to but few of the better feelings of human nature.

"Would to God," cried Horace, the anguished look he had before shown again sweeping over his countenance, which though handsome as ever had recently grown pale with dissipation,—"would to God—that I could throw off these golden shackles which a lordly title and a courtly office have rivetted upon my limbs—aye, not only upon my limbs, but upon my mind also! Venetia, I am sick of it. This scene, which is now passing between you and me, has aroused in my mind feelings and sentiments long dormant there, and has revived many blissful memories of the past! Would to God that all this had never happened—that when we were married we had fled far away from those who had the power to coerce us——"

"Yes—but we were so completely in their power," murmured Venetia, deeply moved by the impassioned language to which her husband had been giving utterance. "It is useless to regret all that has taken place——"

"But the future, Venetia," interrupted Horace, as he threw upon her a strange wild look: "dare you plunge your eyes into the future? It is true that we may be elevated to a more exalted rank than that which we at present hold: the Prince will no doubt fulfil his promise, and on the day when the death of his father shall make him King of England, will bestow still loftier titles upon us. But of what avail will be the exchange of a Baron's coronet for that of an Earl, if life can be only passed by plunging into dissipations and profligacies of all kinds in order to escape from *thought?* Believe me, Venetia, had we at our marriage remained in private life—existing only for each other, and imbibing all our happiness from the pure fount of sincere and honourable love—never, never should I have crossed the threshold of the gaming-house—never should I have become addicted to the juice of the grape—never should I have grown a voluptuary and a debauchee! But all this I am now—all this I have become in less than a year,—in a few short months I may say: and in moments of cool and sober reflection I loathe, I hate myself. Heavens! you weep, Venetia—Oh! you weep!—and *you*, then, are also moved—you feel on your side the same as I do?"

"Yes, yes, my dear Horace," she murmuringly interrupted him; "would to God that we could recall the past—but it is impossible! Our destiny is fixed: we must follow it—we must obey it; and though brilliant in the eyes of the world, yet does it carry its own punishment along with it. Yes—because it will not bear the calmness of reflection; and in order that existence can be made tolerable, it must be an incessant whirl of giddy pleasures, frenzied enjoyments, and intoxicating delights!"

"Oh! to live such a life on to the end!" exclaimed Horace, as if stricken with a cold shudder. "Nevertheless, as you say, dear Venetia, it *must* be endured! But at this moment I am jealous of you—I love you again as a wife—I am mad to think that these glorious charms of yours should ever have been possessed by another—perhaps by *others?*"

"Horace!" Venetia suddenly observed, exerting herself with a strong effort to subdue her emotions; "this scene can endure no longer! I understand, I appreciate, and I share all the feelings which have been excited in your breast: but it is useless—worse than useless—to yield to these moments of softness and tenderness. We must fulfil our destiny—we must observe our compact!"

"Yes—there is no alternative," said Horace. "But at all events there is a melancholy pleasure in such a scene as this; and methinks that it does one good."

"No—it is a weakness to which we ought not to yield," immediately rejoined Venetia, "because it cannot lead to any beneficial result. We know too much of each other, Horace, ever to experience again that sublime confidence—that full and complete trustfulness—which alone can constitute the true happiness of wedded life. On your side you know that I have been unfaithful to you—and on my side I know that you have been unfaithful to me. I use the word *unfaithful* to express my meaning, although it be scarcely applicable: for that cannot be rightly termed *unfaithfulness* which is the result of agreement and mutually assented to. But what I mean you to understand is that, knowing what we do of each other, it were impossible—even were we to abandon a Court life, fly away to a distance, and bury ourselves in some complete solitude—it would be impossible, I say, for us to experience that full measure of affection which must be unalloyed and uncontaminated in order to be complete. In this hour when our natures have melted beneath the influence of those better feelings which are not altogether extinct within us, we experience a revival of all the first freshness of our love: but this would not last! That moral purity which is love's vital and sustaining power, exists not in our case; and in a short time when this transitory tenderness had passed away and our minds had recovered their wonted tone, we should blush as we looked each other in the face!"

"Yes—'tis too true, too true," murmured Horace,

in a deep voice and with a profound mournfulness in his looks.

"Then again, I say," hurriedly continued Venetia, "let us still yield to the strong current of our destiny:"—and she was about to speed from the room, when observing the Bank-notes upon the table, her recollections were in an instant recalled to the origin of this singular and indeed romantic scene with her husband. "My dear Horace," she said, turning back and placing her hand upon his arm while she looked earnestly into his countenance, "you will remember all that I have told you, will you not?"—and she pointed to the Bank-notes.

"My God, yes!" he exclaimed, evidently still under the influence of what has been already termed the better feelings of his nature. "I would destroy myself," he added vehemently, "sooner than be the cause of plunging you more deeply down——"

But Venetia, waiting not to hear the remainder of the sentence, sped away from the room. Hastening up to her own boudoir, she flung off her bonnet and scarf—opened her jewel-case—and carefully deposited therein the one pearl remaining upon the string. Then, seating herself at the table, she drew forth from her writing-desk a number of letters, and began reading them with earnest attention. Oh! often and often had she perused those letters before;—and in some parts there were traces of tears that had fallen—aye, and fallen thickly too, for the writing was in those places wholly obliterated. But she now read them again, because the scene with her husband had opened her mind to those tender sympathies which even the most callous natures or the most worldly dispositions must feel at times.

Yes—she read them again and again—she wept also over those letters: for this was an hour of Venetia's weakness—one of those chastening intervals which occur in the existence of every woman, no matter how lofty her ambition, how unprincipled her conduct, or how profligate her ways.

But in the midst of this occupation her confidential dependant Jessica knocked at the boudoir; and on being desired to enter, she said, "An elderly gentlewoman desires to see your ladyship immediately."

"Who is she? what is her name?" asked Venetia, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes.

"She would not say, my lady. In fact I do not know her—I never saw her before; and she seems a respectable kind of a person. She declares that it is most urgent business on which she desires to see your ladyship."

"Then show her up here," said Venetia; "and order dinner to be served in half-an-hour."

"Does your ladyship dine alone?"

"Yes—quite alone to-day, for the first time indeed for the last six weeks. But the Prince has got a dinner-party of convivial friends and boon companions, from which ladies are excluded. However, show this female up at once."

Jessica flitted away; and during the five minutes of her absence, Venetia replaced the letters in her desk, which she locked. She then looked at herself in the glass—wiped away all traces of her tears—arranged her hair—and re-seating herself, prepared to receive with composed feelings the visitress who was approaching.

Presently the door opened: and Jessica, having ushered in the "elderly gentlewoman," immediately withdrew. But instantaneously recognizing this female's countenance, Venetia gave a start as if seized with a cold shudder; and it was evidently with a sickening sensation that she exclaimed, "Ah, Mrs. Gale!"

CHAPTER CLXXVI.

THE UNWELCOME VISITRESS.

Yes—it was the infamous woman who kept the fashionable house of resort in Soho Square, that now stood in the presence of Venetia. Our readers will remember that we have described her as having a matronly air: indeed she was a woman of what might be termed motherly respectability—one of those kind good-natured souls who would not tread upon a worm, who make the kindest of aunts and the most indulgent of grandmothers, and are always distributing blankets or giving away soup-tickets amongst the poor. No wonder, then, that Jessica had taken her for "a respectable gentlewoman," while in reality beneath that pleasing demeanour was veiled a character of the most depraved and infamous description.

"Yes, my lady, it's me, Mrs. Gale," she said, in reply to Venetia's ejaculation: then looking back to assure herself that the door was shut, she advanced towards the brilliant Lady Sackville, observing with a knowing look, "Ah! I am glad to see you so well off. Many and many a time have I thought of calling, both when you was at Acacia Cottage, and since you have been here at Carlton House: but somehow or another things have always happened to prevent me."

"And what has brought you here now?" asked Venetia in a faint voice; for she could neither appear composed or dignified, nor yet assume any air of fortitude at all, in the presence of that vile old procuress.

"Why should I come, my dear lady," said Mrs. Gale, quietly depositing herself upon a chair, though uninvited, "except to have a little bit of chat and also talk about another small matter—of which however more presently. Well, what a sweet room you have got here to be sure!" she continued, calmly gazing around her and looking for all the world as if she felt herself a most welcome guest. "I never did see such a beautiful boudoir in all my life; and I can tell your ladyship that I have been in a few in my time. But really one would think that you wasn't pleased to see me?"

"Yes—I am very pleased," murmured Venetia, still in a faint voice: and though she endeavoured to appear more affable towards the woman, yet for the life of her she could not.

"Then you are unwell—or you have had something to annoy you?—for you certainly don't look quite the thing. And yet, dear me! you *ought* to be happy as the day is long. Here you are, married to a very handsome man—a lady of title—rolling in riches—riding in a carriage—living in a palace—the star of fashion—the worshipped of the Aristocracy—and the favourite mistress of the Prince."

"Which I suppose is pretty generally known,"

remarked Venetia, now growing more collected and speaking with mingled bitterness and irony.

"Yes—it's well known enough," replied Mrs. Gale, either not observing, or else not choosing to observe the peculiarity of Venetia's accents: "and very proud you ought to be when you think of it. Ah! I dare say you are indeed envied enough; and as for jealousy, why it's natural that every handsome woman about the Court should be jealous of your ladyship. But it's no wonder you have risen to such a rank and that you are able to keep it; for the very first day you and me met, you struck me as being the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in all my life. But you are really handsomer now than ever! Setting aside that little look of annoyance which you wore just now, but which seems to be passing, I declare you appear more brilliant—more magnificent—than ever!"

"I thank you for these assurances," said Venetia, not altogether insensible to the tribute just paid to the grandeur of her charms.

"Ah! it would indeed have been a pity," continued Mrs. Gale, "if anything else had happened to you than what did at the time——"

"Be pleased to tell me," interrupted Venetia, hastily, "what special business has brought you hither now: for that you have some other purpose than that of merely conversing with me, you yourself have avowed."

"Well, there *is* a little favour your ladyship can do me," rejoined Mrs. Gale, with her blandest tone and her most motherly looks.

"Ah! favour—favour," muttered Venetia impatiently, between her pearly teeth: "no one ever comes near me except to ask a favour or extort money."

"And your ladyship, being so kind, so good, and so amiable," added Mrs. Gale, who had caught every word thus uttered but did not choose to take offence at the meaning of the sentence, "never refuses any body. I know your ladyship does not: the very newspapers speak of your generosity—your charity—your benevolence!"

"Yes—but it is not charity which *you*, Mrs. Gale, can possibly seek at my hands," said Venetia.

"Well, I don't know that it's exactly charity: but I am in a terrible mess of troubles at the present moment, and I really don't know how to get myself out of them. Your ladyship has no doubt read the account of that rascal Emmerson, who was executed on Monday?"

"Yes. But what of him?"

"Why, between you and me and the post," returned Mrs. Gale, "he was accustomed to use my house—especially with that Lady Curzon whose death at Geneva has lately been in all the papers. No doubt your ladyship has seen *that* too?"

"Yes—I have read the whole of that tragedy of horrors," answered Venetia quickly. "But proceed."

"Speaking of this tragedy, is it not a dreadful thing?" said Mrs. Gale, who was apt to be garrulous. "Why, of all the names figuring in that strange story I know several; and now that they are dead and gone there is no harm in speaking of them. But if they were alive, not a word about their doings would issue from my lips. Discretion!—there is nothing like discretion! That's my motto. But however, as I was saying, I knew several of them. Malpas was at one time constantly at my house along with Lady Curzon: and afterwards she used to come with Emmerson: and then——But, 'pon my word, I beg your ladyship's pardon!" exclaimed the woman, who really had forgotten all about the intrigue of the deceased Countess with Lady Sackville's husband and the scandal which the discovery thereof had created at the time. "It didn't strike me at the moment what delicate ground I was treading on. However, these things do happen in fashionable life; and so I dare say your ladyship has taken it cool enough about your husband? But as I was saying, I have had Malpas and Lady Curzon in my house; and I also had the Earl of Curzon and Lady Prescott one night at my house. Ah! I dare say she thought at the time that I didn't know her: but I did though. I had seen her in attendance upon the Queen at Windsor Castle——"

"Do you mean to tell me that you have ever been inside Windsor Castle?" asked Venetia, evidently suspecting that the woman was indulging in a mere idle piece of bravado.

"Aye, that I have—more than once," she confidently rejoined; "and have acted as midwife there too! But of that no matter! Few people know better than I do that a Court is not the centre of virtue, and that Ladies-in-Waiting and Women of the Bed-chamber may now and then have a child, though perhaps their husbands have been absent as Governors of Colonies or Generals of Armies for two or three years. Besides which, though a lady may be a Maid of Honour by *title*, it doesn't follow she should be so in *fact*: and let me assure you also," added Mrs. Gale significantly, as if she could tell more if she chose, "that the Royal Princesses are not the most virtuous ladies in existence."

"So I have heard," remarked Venetia, unwillingly suffering herself to be interested in this conversation: but suddenly recollecting the infamous character of the woman whom she was thus encouraging in her tittle-tattle, and also remembering that time was passing away and that her dinner-hour approached, she said, "But pray come to the point, Mrs. Gale. You began by speaking to me about the forger Emmerson."

"Ah, the villain!" ejaculated the dame. "As I told your ladyship just now, he used to frequent my house, and paid so liberally that I had the highest opinion of him. Besides, to tell you the truth, on two or three occasions when he was there with Lady Curzon, I happened to overhear them chatting together——"

"In plain terms, you listened, I suppose?" said Venetia, scarcely able to conceal her disgust for the woman or her impatience at her garrulity.

"Well, well, I suppose it was so," replied Mrs. Gale, laughing. "But sure enough I heard Emmerson talking about writing her ladyship cheques for thousands of pounds; and so I had the highest opinion of my customer. Thinking that I should like to lay out some money at good interest, I one evening spoke to Mr. Emmerson on the matter, and he told me to come and see him upon the business at his office. So I paid him a visit accordingly, and put a couple of thousand pounds into his hands. Soon afterwards he told me that he had an opportunity of laying out three

thousand more to the greatest advantage; and I was fool enough to nibble at the bait. Well, my dear lady, to make a long story short——"

"Yes—do for heaven's sake!" interjected Venetia.

"I will," answered Mrs. Gale. "I have lost, then, better than five thousand pounds by that Emmerson; and it's a very cruel thing to lose one's hard earnings in that manner," added the woman, shaking her head with as much solemn mournfulness as if it were the produce of the most honourable industry instead of the wages of iniquity that she was thus deploring.

"Pray go on. Wherefore do you come to me? The loss you speak of can have scarcely impoverished you," observed Venetia.

"Yes—but it *has* put me to very great inconvenience," returned Mrs. Gale; "because I have a certain sum to pay to-morrow by twelve o'clock for a renewal of the lease of my house in Soho Square; and what little money I have got left is so locked up that I really can't touch it. If I don't pay the lawyers to-morrow by twelve o'clock I lose the lease; and you, my dear Lady Sackville, who have seen my establishment and know how beautifully fitted up it is, must be aware how dreadfully inconvenient it would be to have to turn out and get another—besides the loss of custom in the mean time. So I thought that if you would accommodate me with a couple of thousand pounds——"

"I!" ejaculated Venetia, in mingled astonishment and indignation. "I accommodate you with such an amount!"

"Yes—*you!*" rejoined the woman, all in a moment assuming the insolent look and dogged manner of an extortioner resolute in bleeding a victim.

"What! this impertinence to me?" exclaimed Venetia, her eyes flashing fire as she started from her seat. "How dare you force your way into my presence for such a purpose as this?"

"Because might makes right," answered Mrs. Gale, with an impudent leer,—all the benevolence of her manner having become changed into a coarse brutal dogged air.

"Might against right!" ejaculated Venetia, scornfully. "What mean you?"

"I mean that your ladyship is completely in my power," returned Mrs. Gale. "Come now—those eyes of your's are very handsome, but none the more so for flashing fire: and as I am very tough I am not going to be singed by their looks. Two thousand pounds I want—and two thousand pounds I mean to have from *you!*"

"And what if I refuse?" said Venetia, her cheeks becoming pale with rage and her lips white and quivering.

"But you don't dare refuse! One word from my lips would blast your reputation for ever!"

"'Tis false, vile hag!" exclaimed Lady Sackville. "I was pure—I was virtuous——"

"Aye, but who would believe it?" cried Mrs. Gale jeeringly. "Not a soul in the universe! Besides, whether or not——"

"This is a detestable proceeding on your part!" interrupted Venetia, a prey to mingled terror and rage.

"It may be so: but I am not the less determined. You are rolling in riches; and never as yet have you given one single sixpence to the person who may be said to have been the very one that introduced you to this brilliant career—I mean myself."

"I dare say you received your reward from others?" observed Venetia, evidently irresolute how to act.

"That has nothing to do with it," at once retorted Mrs. Gale. "The trifle I received at the time was a beggarly pittance indeed, compared with the service I have rendered you. Why, if you had any gratitude in your nature you would have made me a present the very moment you were installed in that beautiful place down at Knightsbridge! But if you didn't *then*, you surely ought to have thought of me when made a Peeress and brought here to live in a palace?"

"Well," observed Venetia, thinking it prudent to adopt a conciliatory tone, "I will give you some proof of my gratitude on a future occasion. I am unable to do it now. So far from rolling in riches, I am actually most dreadfully embarrassed at this present moment."

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted Mrs. Gale, with coarse rudeness. "I don't believe a word of it. Besides, you shan't put me off with any trumpery excuses of this kind. You have already behaved ungrateful enough; and just now if I hadn't shown a spirit, you would have had me kicked out of the place. But I wasn't to be put down by you."

"I did not intend to be uncivil," observed Venetia, showing by the increasing meekness of her manner how cruelly embarrased she was.

"Ah! it's all very fine for you to eat humble pie now, but you wouldn't have done so if I hadn't brought you down a peg or two. Come, my lady," added the woman with increasing insolence alike of tone and manner; "hand me over two thousand pounds to-night—or to-morrow morning I will spread it abroad all over London that the brilliant, the proud, the worshipped Lady Sackville was——"

"Hush!—enough—desist—I implore you!" cried Venetia. "Two thousand pounds! I cannot give you that sum to-night."

"But I *will* and *must* have it," said Mrs. Gale, resuming the seat from which she had risen: "and here will I remain till it is forthcoming."

"But this is the vilest—the most hideous of tyrannies!" exclaimed Venetia, trembling with excitement.

"I dare say it is," rejoined the woman, who, perceiving that her triumph was sure, grew more and more resolute, insolent, and dogged.

"To-morrow—at any hour you choose to name——"

"No—I shall come here no more. To-morrow the doors would be shut in my face."

"On my honour, as a lady——"

"Enough! I will have the money to-night."

"But I have it not," cried Venetia, in a positive agony of excitement.

"Then you can get it," returned the woman brutally.

"Here! take my jewels—anything—everything, as a guarantee that I will send you the money to redeem them!"

"No—if I took them away, you would declare I had stolen them. It is useless to continue this discussion. Besides," added Mrs. Gale, vindictively, "I saw from the very first that you liked my

presence as little as might be; and just now you would have turned me out if you had dared. So I choose to be revenged on you in my own way for your impudence. That's the reason which makes me so peremptory in demanding the money at once—besides my really wanting it for to-morrow, which is no lie. Let me see," she continued, looking at her watch, "it is now seven o'clock. Well, I don't mind staying here till midnight. You can in the meantime go amongst your friends and get the money."

But you cannot possibly mean to remain here all these hours?" cried Venetia.

"I do," was the dogged response.

Lady Sackville threw herself upon the sofa in despair. What was to be done? She flung a glance at Mrs. Gale, on whose countenance sat the most determined resoluteness of purpose. Farther appeal to her was all in vain. Venetia then swept her eyes around the boudoir, as if in search of something that might be suggestive of the manner in which she was to act: she felt as if she could immolate the insolent old extortioner to her rage! Ah! a sudden idea struck her: and springing from her seat, she said, "Wait a few minutes,"—and hurried from the room.

Her hope was that her husband, who was to dine with the Prince, might not as yet have parted with the twenty thousand pounds she had given him an hour before—in which case she would obtain of him the wherewith to satisfy Mrs. Gale. But, Horace, whom she found in his dressing-room, had already sent off the money to the gambling-house keeper by Captain Tash, who was himself to form one of the royal party. Lord Sackville had therefore only five hundred pounds left, which he offered to his wife, and which she accepted. But perceiving that she was agitated, he asked her what it was that annoyed her, and for what purpose she required the money: whereupon she observed that it was merely an importunate milliner's bill which had been presented, but that the five hundred pounds would satisfy the applicant at present. She said nothing about Mrs. Gale: because, though her husband was acquainted with nearly all the circumstances of her earlier life, he was nevertheless ignorant of that *one* event which had connected her at any period and even for a single day with the infamous woman. The excuse which Venetia made, as the reason for requiring the money, satisfied Horace, who was moreover in too great a hurry to dress—he being already late—to remain conversing unnecessarily; and Venetia sped back to the boudoir with the Bank-notes for five hundred pounds crumpled up in her hand.

On again entering into the presence of Mrs. Gale, Venetia offered the money as an earnest of her good faith: but this very proceeding on her part only tended to confirm the woman's belief that she would raise heaven and earth to obtain the entire sum rather than incur the risk of the threatened exposure. Mrs. Gale accordingly refused the instalment, and reiterated her determination to abide in that boudoir until the whole sum, in good Bank-notes or in gold, was placed in her hands. This decision she made known with a voice and manner still farther proving how inexorable she was, and how useless it would be to argue with her.

Again therefore was Venetia in despair. What could she do? To leave herself at the mercy of this low brutal woman, would be the same as suicide: for indeed, if once exposed, naught but self-destruction would remain for her! Never, never could she—the magnificent, the proud, the worshipped Venetia—endure to behold the lips of other titled dames curling with scorn, and their looks beaming with contempt upon her! Any sacrifice—yes, *any*—must therefore be made in order to avert the impending danger. For a moment she thought of amassing all her jewels and diamonds, and sending them by Jessica to be pledged: but she remembered that the very next day she was to entertain a select party at luncheon, and she could not possibly appear without her usual embellishments. Not that her beauty required these auxiliaries: but it was the fashion of the day which rendered a profusion of jewellery the indispensable requisite for every toilet.

What was to be done? There was *one* course to be adopted: and from this she recoiled with a cold shuddering. Yet where was the alternative? It were useless to apply to the Prince: she knew that at the moment he was entirely without funds. She had plenty of friends to whom she could address herself: but it would be such an exposure of poverty to *them*—and if the circumstance were whispered abroad, would prove the most painful mortification! The only man of whom she could safely ask such a favour, was absent from town for a few days: this was Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Therefore, having fruitlessly racked her brain for upwards of five minutes, she once more turned her looks appealingly upon Mrs. Gale: but the woman was gazing upon her in a manner which showed that she perceived how cruelly Venetia was embarrassed and that she was actually enjoying it. Goaded therefore to desperation, and suddenly nerving herself to make that *last* sacrifice which was uppermost in her thoughts, and from which she had recoiled ere now with so strong a loathing, she rang the bell violently.

In a few moments Jessica made her appearance; and Venetia in a low whisper bade her hasten and order a hackney-coach round to the private door of the palace. The abigail, without waiting to ask a single question—but doubtless well knowing that her mistress would bestow her usual confidence on her at the first fitting opportunity—hastened to execute the order she had received. Venetia then put on a plain bonnet with a thick veil, and a dark coloured shawl. She took something from her jewel-case and hastily thrust the object into her bosom: and when her preparations were thus made, she turned towards Mrs. Gale, saying in a low thick voice, "I am going to a friend who resides at some distance, to procure this money: it may be two or three hours before I return."

"I have given you until midnight," answered the woman: "and here therefore shall I remain during the interval."

Venetia spoke not another word, but hastily quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER CLXXVII.

THE LAST PEARL.

As she rolled along in the slow lumbering hackney coach, Lady Sackville was a prey to a variety of the most disagreeable—indeed painful reflections. Since the month of December till the present time—it now being July—no less than ninety-nine thousand pounds had been squandered between herself and her husband! Of this enormous amount he had monopolised seventy thousand: the remainder she herself had made away with,—Curzon and Malpas having received the greater portion of the sum. *Now*, out of the hundred thousand pounds which Lord Leveson had for his own special purposes placed at her disposal, but *one* thousand remained to be yet drawn!

In addition to the immense sum of ninety-nine thousand pounds thus scandalously lavished—thus infamously made away with—were to be reckoned the emoluments of Lord Sackville's office and the pecuniary presents which Venetia had received from the Prince; and although the latter were not large, still they formed an item not to be omitted in a general reckoning up of all sources of revenue. As she contemplated the frightful waste of money which had thus taken place, Venetia was absolutely dismayed; and she thought to herself that if these extravagances were to continue, heaven alone knew whence the means of ministering to them were to come. Bitterly, bitterly, did she repent having so far yielded to her husband's demands as to supply his wants so readily. Had she refused to do so, she would not at this moment be at her wits' end for a paltry fifteen hundred pounds to make up the amount demanded by the extortionate Mrs. Gale. But these are always the lessons which a reckless extravagance has to learn—the bitter experiences which a lavish profusion is sure to reap!

On many other disagreeable things did Lady Sackville ponder as she was borne along in the hackney-coach: but when the vehicle suddenly stopped, she gave a convulsive shudder, ejaculating audibly to herself, "No, no!"

Indeed, she was on the point of ordering the driver to turn back; when all the danger that she ran of again facing Mrs. Gale empty-handed, presented itself vividly to her imagination, and she accordingly alighted from the hackney-coach the moment one of the Marquis of Leveson's servants issuing forth from the hall, opened the door of the vehicle.

For it was to this nobleman's mansion that Venetia had come: but with the thick veil drawn in double folds over her face, she was not recognized by the domestics—no, nor even by his lordship's shrewd and cunning valet Brockman, as this individual escorted her up to the Crimson Drawing Room.

Venetia retained her veil over her countenance until the door again opened: then, as the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance, little suspecting who his female visitant might be, Lady Sackville revealed her face, saying, "'Tis I, my lord, who am come to implore your forbearance—or else to surrender at discretion!"

The Marquis was so taken by surprise that a dizziness seized for an instant upon his brain; and he staggered back a pace or two. But almost immediately recovering himself, he took Venetia's hand—conducted her to a seat—placed himself near her—and then gazing in mingled suspense and joy upon her countenance, he said, "Did I understand your ladyship aright? or was it only a delicious dream?"

"My lord, I am at your mercy," answered Venetia, the colour coming and going in quick transitions upon her cheeks a dozen times in a moment, as she produced the string with the *one* remaining pearl and handed that last representative of the hundred thousand pounds to the Marquis.

"Oh! then it is no dream—it is a reality—a bright, a glorious reality!" exclaimed the nobleman, his voice thrilling with exultation. "At length the moment is come when I may wind my arms around you and say, '*Venetia, you are mine!*'"

Suiting the action to the word, Lord Leveson seized Lady Sackville in his fervid embrace, and covered her lips with kisses. She did not resist him: there was a slight recoil on her part—the recoil of an intense loathing which she experienced, but which she cared not now to display more than she could help, because the greater her repugnance the more signal his triumph. Even that slight shudder the Marquis did not notice in the ardour with which he bestowed those caresses upon her: then unwinding his arms, he took off her bonnet—he tore away her shawl from her shoulders,—and when he beheld her in the low-bodied dress which revealed not merely those full-plump shoulders in all their dazzling whiteness, but likewise all the upper part of the grand volume of the bust, he felt that the joys he was about to experience were not too dearly purchased even at the cost of one hundred thousand pounds.

Venetia still resisted him not: but she fixed her eyes upon him with a look so deprecating, so martyrized, so full of mournful entreaty, that if there had been any generosity in his nature he would have relented—yes, he would have relented!—and though that splendid creature was after all but the courtezan of Royalty, and had not a particle of virtue to lose, he would nevertheless have forborne from taking an advantage which to her had all the poignancy of a sacrifice and an immolation!

"And it is thus, Venetia," he said, gazing upon her with looks which, while gloating with a satyr's devouring lustfulness on her charms, were also filled with the radiant satisfaction of triumph,—"it is thus that you have come to surrender yourself at discretion? But, my charmer, you must expect no mercy at my hands! In the warfares of love there can be no mercy shown! Inexorable have you been to all the endeavours which I have previously made to win you to my arms: and now I must prove equally inexorable towards *you!*"

"Is it revenge then, my lord, that you are wreaking upon me?" asked Venetia, in a low voice full of a plaintive melody: "or is it love which, after your own fashion, you mean to bestow upon me?"

"Oh! if I thought that you would be all kindness to me, then assuredly should I be all that is loving, and tender, and affectionate towards you! But," continued the Marquis, with a slight accentuation of bitterness, "when you come to me cold as a marble statue—receiving my caresses as if

you were a being chiselled from a block of ice—allowing me to fling my arms around your neck, but not even so much as pressing my hand in return—what can I think? Why, that you have but made a convenience of the Marquis of Leveson! You accepted me as your banker: but you never, never intended that *this* should be the result! Even until the last day—I might even say until the last hour——for it is but a couple of hours since you were here——you declared, with a glorious smile of triumph upon your countenance, that the last pearl should never find its way back into my possession. Well then, Venetia, you would have robbed——"

"Robbed, my lord?" she ejaculated, the flush of indignation mantling upon her cheeks, and the same sentiment flashing in fire from her eyes.

"Tell me candidly, Lady Sackville—had you remained at the ninety-nine thousand pounds, as you have all along intended to do," demanded the Marquis, "would it not have been the cruelest, the unhandsomest, the unfairest advantage ever taken of a compact which all along could have had but one meaning—and that meaning significant enough! It would, in plain terms, have been what I denominated it—a robbery! I know not what circumstance may have transpired to compel you to pay me this second visit again to-day, and to present me with the last pearl: but this I do know——and most mortifying to my pride would it be, were it not the very symbol of my triumph——that it is naught but some urgent necessity that has driven you to an extreme you all along intended to avoid. Here at the last, then—yes, at the very last—am I still your convenience; and in surrendering yourself under such circumstances, you have not the generosity—I will not say the gratitude—even to affect some little warmth towards the man who has made so enormous a sacrifice to obtain you!"

"In this case," said Venetia, glad of an opportunity to argue the question, as it might furnish some avenue of escape, "you are influenced by revenge—and not by love—in sternly insisting upon the fulfilment of the compact this night? Ah! my lord," she continued, flinging upon him one of her most winning and seductive looks, at the same time taking his hand and seeming to play with it mechanically between both her own,—"why not endeavour, by those tender assiduities which are so acceptable and so flattering unto our sex, to win that love on my part which would render me warm—aye, even glowing and impassioned, towards you, instead of my displaying this frozen demeanour of which you complain!"

"Ah, Venetia!" cried the Marquis, passing his hand over her polished shoulders, and then toying with the tresses of glossy auburn which fell upon those shoulders of alabaster polish,—"I know full well all the sophistries of which your tongue is capable. But listen—I have a proposition to make to you; and if you accept it, never again will you experience the slightest embarrassment in a financial point of view!"

"A proposition!" echoed Venetia, with all the eagerness of hope. "Name it, my lord—name it!"

"Become my mistress altogether," replied the Marquis: "leave the Prince—abandon your husband—and I will forthwith transport you to Leveson Hall in Buckinghamshire, where you shall dwell the queen of that vast domain, with a suitable revenue——"

"Oh! this is most kind—most generous—most noble on your part!" exclaimed Venetia, affecting an enthusiastic gratitude. "But give me a short time to reflect upon the proposition——"

"Dearest Venetia," interrupted the Marquis, at once penetrating through the perfidiousness of her intent, "you can take a day—or a week—to deliberate if you choose."

"Ah! now indeed you overwhelm me with your generosity!" cried Lady Sackville. "Give me, then, the notes for that last pearl, and lend me an additional five hundred guineas."

"Assuredly," answered the nobleman: and, producing his pocket-book, he at once drew forth the amount, which he happened to have about him.

"A thousand, thousand thanks, my dear lord," said Lady Sackville, securing the notes about her person. "Now, then," she added, rising from the sofa with an air of amiable assurance, "you will allow me to depart?—and to morrow evening I will send your lordship my decision respecting the generous, the flattering, and the tempting proposal you have made me."

"Be it so with regard to your decision, my dear Venetia," rejoined the Marquis, with a look half malicious and half ironical, which had the effect of at once annihilating the hope Venetia experienced: "but *that* can make no difference with regard to the fulfilment of our compact to-night."

Lady Sackville answered not a word: she saw at once that her duplicity was penetrated—that her artifice was seen through; and she blushed deeply with the confusion which assailed her, subduing all her wonted fortitude and rendering her powerless for the use of further argument.

"You are mine, Venetia—you are mine!" resumed the Marquis, throwing one arm around her neck and gazing with devouring eyes upon the features that seemed at the instant all the handsomer in the confusion of the blush which mantled on them. "Think you for a single moment that after the sacrifices I have made to obtain you, I should be so contemptible an idiot—so wretched a madman—so flagrant a dolt, as to suffer any postponement of that joy which is now within my reach? I have made you a proposition; and if you like to accept it my travelling-carriage shall be ordered, and away will we speed to Leveson Hall. But if, on the other hand, you decline that proposition—or choose to defer a positive answer upon the subject—then must you be mine to-night—mine at once!"

As the Marquis thus spoke Venetia saw that his passions were kindled to an overpowering degree; and there was something hideous in that old man, so made up of artificialities as he was, now exhibiting all the gloating licentiousness of a satyr. But still she veiled as well as she was able, and with a mighty effort, the outward manifestation of her feelings: for she resolved that if she *must* succumb, she would not afford him reason to believe that he had consummated a mighty vengeance as well as a signal triumph.

"As I have already said, my lord," she observed, "I am at your mercy. I surrender at discretion."

"Then come this way—this way," said the Marquis, in the hurry of excitement: and he led her towards the door that opened into the private suite of apartments.

"Wherefore into those rooms?" she asked, now drawing herself up with a look of haughty remonstrance.

"Not into the gallery, my dearest creature," responded the Marquis, with a salacious look. "With you as my companion, there is no need for such artificial excitement as that! It is to a private chamber that we repair by this means of communication: for surely you would not wish to pass forth from the drawing-room and across the landing outside at the risk of being observed and recognized by any one loitering there?"

"No," interrupted Venetia; "you are right. I am prepared to accompany you:"—and as she thus spoke she felt so completely as a victim and a martyr that she thought within herself if ever an opportunity should arise to furnish her with the means of a bitter revenge, she would not hesitate to wreak it: for although she had received the price for the surrender of her charms, yet did she more than ever loathe, abhor, and hate the man who now insisted upon the fulfilment of the bargain.

Taking a key from his pocket, the Marquis of Leveson opened the door leading into the first room of the suite; and carrying a candle in his hand, he entered in company with Venetia. Having paused for a moment to fasten the door again, he led on into the next apartment, which, as the reader will recollect, was the one containing the mechanical chairs.

But at the very moment that he and Venetia crossed the threshold of this room, they were both smitten with amazement and dismay on beholding one of the chairs occupied by an individual whom they at once recognized to be Daniel Coffin, the Hangman!

CHAPTER CLXXVIII.

THE PRIVATE APARTMENTS.

SINCE a very early hour in the morning had the Public Executioner been held a captive there: and it is probable that he would have already sunk into the stupor of exhaustion, through hunger and thirst and the fearful but unavailing struggles he had made to extricate himself, were it not that a terrible excitement kept all his vital energies in the fullest play. It is however impossible to conceive anything in the shape of a human countenance more hideous than his features now appeared to be. They seemed as if some goading anguish had fastened upon his very heart's core: a fierce and unnatural light, vibrating and reptile-like, shone in his eyes, indicating the feverish rage of wild and diabolic passions: his cheeks, sallow in hue, were sunken and hollow;—and all the lower part of his countenance, through being unshaven, had that dark appearance which added to the savage ferocity of his mien. His hat lay upon the carpet: his hair was matted together with the perspiration that had oozed forth in the desperate but vain efforts he had made to release himself;—and altogether he presented to the view as hideous and revolting a spectacle as ever wore the human shape.

He at once recognized the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Sackville. The latter he had frequently seen riding in her carriage: for he it remembered that although he had even been in her company once before, in this very same suite of rooms,—on the occasion when Sir Douglas Huntingdon had procured his attendance there,—yet Venetia had *then* her veil thickly folded over her face, so that the Hangman had recognized her not. But *now*—on this present occasion—she had no veil to conceal her features; her bonnet and shawl had been left in the Crimson Drawing Room:—and the Hangman at once perceived that it was none other than the brilliant Lady Sackville who was accompanying the Marquis of Leveson to that suite of rooms to which he would have dared conduct no lady save for the purpose of gallantry and intrigue.

As for Venetia herself, she was at once so amazed—so confounded—on beholding this dreadful man seated captive in one of the chairs, that she had no presence of mind to avert her head, much less to retreat and thus avoid recognition. A similar suspension of all the powers of volition nailed the Marquis to the spot, rendering him unmindful of the fact that the honour of Venetia was suddenly compromised to a fearful extent—and indeed depriving him for the moment of all power to think or act.

But suddenly starting as it were into the keenest consciousness of her position, Venetia gave vent to a cry, and hastily retreating, threw herself upon a sofa in the first room of the suite, and out of sight of the terrible Hangman. At the same moment the Marquis of Leveson, recovering his presence of mind, advanced close up to the ruffian, saying in a stern voice, but with a look denoting the most highly-wrought curiosity, "What in heaven's name brought you hither?"

"My own cursed folly, I should think," was Daniel Coffin's savage reply. "But come—make haste and let me loose, my lord; or, by Satan, it'll be the worse for somebody before I've done."

"Stop one moment," said the Marquis. "What guarantee will you give me——But do you know that lady?"

"Bless you, I know her well enough! All the world knows her," responded the Hangman. "But it's no business of mine if she chooses to come here with your lordship. Let me loose—and that's all I care about."

"Well—but how came you here?" reiterated the Marquis. "I must have an answer to that question."

"Why, in plain terms, I paid your precious niece a visit," answered Coffin; "and she, enticing me here, flung me into the chair. It is a deuced good lark—Ah! ah!"—and he affected to chuckle good-humouredly: "though rather a trying condition for a fellow to be in. But, however, just let me loose."

The Marquis had no inclination to prolong this interview. He was anxious to be alone again with Venetia; and he was unwilling that she should hear anything more disparaging than she already knew relative to Ernestina. He accordingly at once touched the spring which governed the hidden mechanism of the chair; and the Hangman rose slowly and painfully from his seat. But so fearfully cramped were his limbs that he fell down upon the carpet.

"Are you ill? what is the matter?" demanded Lord Leveson, seriously alarmed.

"Oh! I shall be all right in a minute or two," growled the Hangman, stretching his arms and legs as he lay with his back upon the carpet. "But it's enough to make a man feel queer after being held tight in that cursed contrivance of yours ever since about two o'clock this morning—I don't mean the middle of the day, mind—but the middle of the night."

"Have you been there so long?" said the Marquis: then making the fellow a sign of intelligence as he caught his eye, he said, "But you need not enter into particulars *now*: another time you shall tell me the whole grievance—for which I shall however remunerate you at once. Come, let us make a bargain."

"Oh, well—I am open to that," observed the Hangman, now slowly rising from the floor, but still with much painful difficulty. "What's the bargain about?"

"That you forget you have seen anybody here with me this evening," answered the Marquis. "Will a hundred guineas seal your lips in that respect?"

"Make it two, my lord," said the Hangman: "for by Satan! I want some good kind of grease to rub upon these cramped limbs of mine; and there's none better that I know of than money."

"Here are two Bank-notes for a hundred each," said the Marquis. "But now the difficulty is, how to get you out of the house."

"Not a bit," exclaimed the Hangman, sticking his hat upon his head, when he had thrust the Bank-notes into his waistcoat pocket. "Just open that secret door in the wall—let me pass through the two rooms there—and when I once reach the staircase I will walk down as bold as brass. If the hall-porter or any of your lordship's flunkeys ask me who I am——"

"Say that you are a person been to see my valet Brockman," at once suggested the Marquis.

"As good an excuse as any, I dare say," returned the Hangman. "So now good evening, my lord."

With these words Daniel Coffin made his exit by the secret door which the Marquis of Leveson had just opened, and which he immediately afterwards closed again behind the departing form of the hideous ruffian. Great, too, was the relief which his lordship experienced when the Hangman was no longer in his presence; and he said to himself, "What new trouble is Ernestina involving herself in? and how on earth could this dreadful man have found either the excuse or the means to visit her?"

For a few moments the Marquis was so bewildered and perplexed that he felt as if he could not settle his mind to anything until he had sought an explanation from Ernestina: but the recollection that the beautiful Venetia was close at hand speedily absorbed all other considerations; and hastening back to the adjoining room, he found her seated in an apparently half-fainting condition upon the sofa where she had thrown herself.

"Fear nothing, dearest Venetia," said the Marquis: "he is gone."

"Oh! the hideous monster," murmured Lady Sackville, affecting to have experienced a far greater shock than she actually had, much though in reality she had been moved by the occurrence: but by pretending to be thus entirely overpowered as it were, she hoped to excite the compassion of the Marquis.

"I feel ill—very ill," she said, closing her eyes, and placing her hand upon her brow.

"Then I will be your nurse, charming creature," said the Marquis: and he impressed a fervid kiss upon her lips.

"Oh, my lord, after such a scene as *that*, will you not take compassion on me? will you show me no mercy?" she asked in a tone of plaintive entreaty.

"Permit me, dearest, to assist you to a chamber close at hand—that chamber," added Lord Leveson, "whither I was about to escort you just now: and there may you prove the most interesting of invalids and I the most attentive of all nurses."

"Ah! this is a cruel mockery, my lord!" exclaimed Venetia, slowly raising herself up into a sitting posture and bending her looks reproachfully upon the Marquis.

"My sweet lady," replied the nobleman, "admitting that the surprise was great and the consternation overpowering for the moment, yet I *do* think that a more speedy recovery from such terror and dismay is possible on the part of a lady of your strong mind and well-toned nerves—especially as it is not the first time you have seen the Public Executioner; but in this very room some months back did he appear as a friend to serve your cause, which at the time was so ably championised by Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

"My lord, you are bitter and sarcastic to a degree," answered Venetia, now resuming the appearance of complete self-possession, and suddenly clothing herself with a look of calm hauteur.

"Venetia, if you have to complain of my manner or tone this evening," rejoined the Marquis, "it is you who provoke every word of irony—every syllable of sarcasm—to which I may give utterance. What arts, and tricks, and duplicities have you not attempted within the short hour that you have been with me this evening, to escape from the fulfilment of our compact? But you accepted the bargain, and it shall be adhered to. There is no Douglas Huntingdon here to defend you now; and the very man," continued the Marquis with a malignant significancy, "who was brought as a witness in your favour, could now be produced as one against you. Ah! I behold a certain gleaming in you eye—and I understand it! You would remind me that you are acquainted with certain things—bad and derogatory enough, God knows!—about Ernestina—those things, in fact, of which Huntingdon spoke when you were here together. But you must not threaten me now, Venetia! For every word that you might utter against my niece, could I proclaim an equivalent scandal in reference to yourself. Besides, we have but *one* object to keep in view this evening—which is that the beautiful Lady Sackville, the favourite mistress of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent, has accepted a hundred thousand pounds from the Marquis of Leveson on a certain condition!"

"Which she is now here to fulfil," responded Venetia, bending a proud look upon the Marquis, as if making a merit of this surrender of her charms, and even at the very last asserting the power of one who grants a concession rather than fulfils a compact.

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It wanted ten minutes of midnight when Lady Sackville alighted from a hackney-coach at the private entrance to Carlton House; and speeding up the back-staircase, she reached her boudoir unobserved by a single soul.

Mrs. Gale was dozing on the sofa: the wax-lights were burning on the mantel; and a tray on the table, containing sandwiches and wine, showed that Jessica had supplied refreshments during her lady's absence.

The moment Mrs. Gale heard the door open, she started up; and on beholding Lady Sackville, who however had the veil closely drawn down over her features, she glanced towards the time-piece on the mantel, saying, "Ah, well! your ladyship is indeed in good time. I suppose you have brought the money with you?"

"Here it is," replied Venetia, in a voice that sounded strange and hollow; and still she raised not the veil. "Take it, take it—and good night!"

Mrs. Gale hastily ran her eye over the Bank-notes to assure herself that the precise sum she had demanded was there. Satisfied on this head, she put on her bonnet; and moving towards the door, said, "Well, my dear lady, I hope we are not going to part bad friends? I am sure I don't want any unpleasantness between us."

"No—there is none, there is none!" interrupted Venetia quickly: "but for God's sake leave me—I am tired——I am ill——"

"Well, my dear, I certainly won't stay to vex

you: for you have behaved well at last:"—and with these words Mrs. Gale took her departure.

And now, when alone, Venetia flung off her bonnet and shawl, and wringing her hands with ineffable anguish, she gave way to the wildest ebullition of grief. No wonder was it that she had retained her veil over her features while the old procuress was still present: for she must have felt that they wore an expression of withering agony—an agony powerful enough, one would almost think, to blight and sear every lineament of that proud and brilliant beauty which had been alike her glory and her shame!

Yes—it was indeed to prevent Mrs. Gale from observing her altered looks that Venetia had continued closely veiled until the woman took her departure: but now giving vent to the full tide of her anguish, she wrung her hands—sobbed bitterly—poured forth floods of tears—and then burying her face in the cushions of the sofa, endeavoured to stifle the sobs and subdue the convulsive gaspings the sounds of which were too distressing even for her own ears.

CHAPTER CLXXIX.

THE SUPPER-DEVOURER.

But Venetia was not the only lady of rank and beauty who on this memorable night experienced the lancinating influence of ineffable woe. At the very time that she was compelled to surrender herself to the embraces of the Marquis of Leveson, this nobleman's niece Lady Ernestina Dysart was passing through another phase in her own strange and chequered career.

The reader is already aware that Ernestina had been up the whole of the preceding night, and that during all the earlier portion of the day she was engaged at the villa at Blackheath. It was not till the afternoon that she got back to Leveson House; and then, wearied and worn out in body and feeling as if all mental energy had abandoned her for ever, she at once sought her bed-chamber and retired to rest. A profound slumber soon entranced her; and she slept on tranquilly until a late hour in the evening. When she awoke she found a maid-servant seated by the bed-side, and lights burning in the room.

"What o'clock is it?" asked Ernestina.

"Half-past nine, my lady," was the response. "His lordship, on hearing that your ladyship had returned and had come up to your room, felt uneasy that you did not descend again; and he accordingly sent me up to attend upon your ladyship."

"Go and procure me some refreshment," said Ernestina: then suddenly recollecting something, she added, "Give my kind regards to my uncle—say that I feel indisposed—but that if he will step up and see me I should take it as a kindness."

The servant quitted the room; and when Ernestina was again alone she began to deliberate with herself whether she should reveal to her uncle's ears the tremendous outrage she had experienced from Daniel Coffin, and explain the fearful nature of the punishment which she was inflicting on that man. She felt the necessity of obtaining her uncle's concurrence in this respect, so as to guard against the possibility of any one entering the secret apartments and effecting the liberation of the intended victim. But would her uncle become a party to the infliction of that frightful vengeance?—would he make himself an accomplice in the tremendous process of thus killing a human being by inches within the walls of that house? That was the question. But still when Ernestina passed in review all the arguments for or against the probable result, she came to the conclusion that her uncle *would* assist her in avenging so terrific an outrage and leaving the Hangman to his fate. Indeed, it would be impossible to permit so desperate a man to go forth into the world again as her implacable and unrelenting enemy.

Such were Ernestina's reflections during the maid-servant's temporary absence from the room; and the result was a determination to tell her uncle everything. But when the domestic reappeared, bearing a tray containing refreshments, Ernestina was informed that the Marquis of Leveson had gone out suddenly and unexpectedly at about seven o'clock and had not yet returned.

The real truth was that the faithful valet Brockman, knowing his lordship to be engaged in the Crimson Drawing Room, or elsewhere, with a lady, had purposely informed the maid-servant that he had gone out; and hence the message now delivered by this female dependant to Ernestina.

"In that case," said her ladyship, "I will defer seeing my uncle till the morning. You may now retire; and I shall not need you any more this night."

When again alone, Ernestina began to reflect that after all it was perhaps much better her uncle was not at home. If he were, he might have objected to become an accomplice in the infliction of a slow, lingering, and terrible death upon Coffin;—he might have insisted on liberating the wretch at all hazards and at any risks.

"But since he has gone out," thought Ernestina, continuing her musings as she sat up in bed to partake of the refreshments which had been brought, "it is most likely he will spend the entire evening away from home, and not return till a late hour. That he will visit his private suite of apartments to-night is therefore by no means probable; and when to-morrow comes it is to be hoped that the agonies of thirst, the pangs of hunger, and the exhausting efforts of maddened attempts to escape, will have consummated the work of death. But when once the deed is done and the wretch shall be no more, my uncle *must* adopt some means to dispose of the corpse. It will be too late *then* for him to refuse to assent to the act or become an accessary to its perpetration; and the only thing for him to consider will be the best means of making away with all evidences of the occurrence."

In this strain did Ernestina continue to weigh the results of her vengeance in respect to the Hangman; and gradually the desire began to arise in her mind to satisfy herself that this vengeance was proceeding according to her hopes and expectations. Perhaps the object of her inveterate hatred was already dead? Who could tell how long or how short a period it might take to send a man out of existence by such a process as that? It was not so much the hunger and thirst: those, she knew full well, might be endured for days and

days: but it was the terrible nature of the captivity—the strange and horrible restriction of the person—the fearful crampings of all the limbs—and the wearing, tearing, heart-breaking efforts which a strong man was sure to make in his utter desperation to release himself,—these constituted the exhausting powers that should lead to speedy dissolution! Likely enough then, did she deem it, that he had already ceased to exist; and the frightful outrage she had experienced made her feel a ferocious desire to gratify her vindictive rage with a view of the cold inanimate corpse of him who had so terribly abused her. Yes—and for the same reason too, if he were not yet dead, did her revengeful hate prompt her to go and feast her eyes upon the excruciations, the agonies, and the tortures which the wretch must be suffering!

Thus, in either case—whether he were dead or alive—did the implacability and dark ferocity of her revenge urge her to pay a visit to the room were she had left her victim. Yielding to the influence of this morbid feeling, Lady Ernestina Dysart rose from the couch, and began to put on some of her clothing. She felt refreshed by the hours of tranquil slumber which she had enjoyed, and invigorated by the food and wine of which she had just partaken. Well fitted, then, was she for the proceedings which she proposed to undertake: but the state of her mind was very far removed from aught at all bordering upon happiness. True, she was released from the *one* tremendous source of alarm that for a year past had ever been menacingly imminent: namely, the tragedy of the bath-room at the Blackheath villa. But though thus relieved from a sense of danger on that head, was she not now crushed as it were by the consciousness of so awful a degradation that depraved and unprincipled though she were, it was impossible for her to remain callous to *that?* No—she indeed felt that she was polluted beyond all purification—that she was as loathsome an object in her own esteem as if she had been dragged through the ordeal of all the lowest stews and filthiest brothels with which the metropolis abounds: and if the thought of her beauty now arose in her mind, it was only to make her shudder at the revolting recollection that every charm had been in the possession of the common hangman. Awful and hideous recollection!—astounding idea!—crucifying thought!—enough to stun her senses with dismay, or else goad them to a rabid frenzy!

She was in the midst of resuming her apparel, when her ear suddenly caught the sound of some one turning the handle of the door; and she fancied that the maid was coming back, probably to say that the Marquis of Leveson had returned. But quickly did the door open—a form passed as rapidly in—and as the door closed again and the key turned in the lock, a horrible groan came from Ernestina's tongue, and she sank down upon her knees in the presence of the Hangman!

"Ah! the tables are turned now," he said, in a tone of diabolic ferocity, while his hideous countenance glared upon the unhappy woman as if every lineament were menacing of murder.

"O God!" she said, clasping her hands in utter despair, and feeling as if the cold hand of death were already upon her.

"Ah! food—wine!" ejaculated the Hangman, suddenly catching sight of the tray upon a table close by the bed. "Just what I want!"—and he was bounding with the rabid eagerness of famine towards the refreshments, when, swift as the startled deer, Ernestina sprang from her knees, swept towards the mantel, and seized the bell-rope.

But at that very instant the Hangman turned and grasped her wrist with such fearful violence that she shrieked out with the pain. Another second, and he would have been too late to prevent her from making the bell ring.

"Silence, and sit down!" he said, with tone and looks of an infernal ferocity; then having flung her as it were into a chair, he took the towels from the wash-hand stand and bound her in such a way that she could not rise from the seat.

Ernestina struggled not, and spoke not a word. A fearful terror was upon her. She saw that the man was half maddened and capable of any deed of violence—even murder itself; and polluted, degraded, lost even in her own estimation as she was, yet when thus at any moment her death-blow might be dealt, the instinctive clingings to life asserted their power.

"Now you will stay there as long as I like," said the Hangman, speaking with a hyena-like ferocity. "But if you make any noise, *this* will soon silence you!"—and as he spoke he drew forth his sharp clasp-knife, the blade of which had a horrible ghastly appearance that caused the blood to stagnate throughout the unhappy woman's entire being.

Daniel Coffin now sat down at the table, and began to eat and drink with the avidity of a wild beast. The maid-servant had placed several dishes upon the tray in order to tempt Lady Ernestina's appetite—cold chicken, tongue, pigeon-pie, and jellies, together with sherry and Port wine. As a supper there would have been sufficient for six or eight persons; but almost incredible was the inroad which Daniel Coffin made upon the viands. Dish after dish did he attack with the ravenous appetite of one who had been starving for whole days. The cold fowl was picked to the very bones; and even some of these did he crunch and swallow during the devouring process. Of the tongue, which was nearly entire when he thrust his fork into it, did he leave but a few pieces of the fat and tough portions of the root; and as for the pigeon-pie, it disappeared with a proportionate rapidity. This tremendous supper he washed down with the wine, which he drank out of a tumbler, just as if it were mere water or malt liquor that he thus poured down his capacious throat;—and the repast was wound up with the jellies, all of which he disposed of in half a dozen twinklings of the eye.

While the Hangman was engaged in his monster-repast, Lady Ernestina Dysart endeavoured to collect her ideas and look her altered position in the face. But this she could not do steadily and deliberately: it was impossible for her to reason with calmness in the presence of this fearful calamity which had overtaken her. Turned indeed were the tables now! There sat the Hangman—her master—having full power of life and death over her: and here was she bound captive and helpless in a chair. What would he do with her?—what course did he mean to adopt?—what horrors would the implacability of his vengeance suggest? In a word, what was to be her

fate? She knew not:—and how in the midst of those ice-like shudderings and freezing tremors which passed over her, could she possibly settle her thoughts so as to frame a conjecture upon the awful subject?

"There! that will do for once," said the Hangman, pushing away his plate: then as he poured the remains of the wine into the tumbler and surveyed with a grim complacency the various dishes he had emptied, he observed, "This supper is certainly a trifle of compensation for upwards of twenty hours' captivity in that cursed chair: and considering that I hadn't eaten anything since nine o'clock last evening, my fast may be reckoned for at least twenty-five hours."

He then poured the remainder of the wine down his throat: and after smacking his lips, fixed his eyes upon Ernestina.

"Well, and what do you think of yourself now," he continued, "after playing me such a pretty trick? By Jove! it is enough to make one stark-staring mad to think of it. But how do you suppose I got loose?" he demanded with an ironical grin. "The vices of you aristocrats are often nuts for me to crack somehow or another. To tell the truth, I had pretty well given up all hope, when lo and behold! the door opens—a light shines in—and who the deuce should make their appearance but your precious uncle and Lady Sackville?"

"Ah!" ejaculated Ernestina, amazement for the moment rising above her terror. "My uncle and Venetia?"

"Aye, that it was," exclaimed the Hangman, with a grim smile. "What scandalous reprobates you women of quality are, to be sure! However, a capital thing it was for me that this should have happened to-night: for I do believe I should have been dead before morning. *Now*, so far from dying or any chance of it, I am in the best possible feather—two hundred pounds in my pocket—a good supper and a couple of bottles of wine under my waistcoat—and one of the handsomest women of the Aristocracy for my mistress."

Ernestina gave a sudden start and a faint cry as these last words, so full of terrible menace, smote her ears: but feeling the next instant how utterly powerless she was, she sank back in the chair with a low deep moan, and her head fell forward upon the luxuriant volume of her naked bosom.

"It's above an hour and a half ago that I was let loose from that cursed chair," resumed the Hangman; "and I meant to come straight up to this room at once, but I heard some one about on the stairs—so I just slipped into another chamber—the first that was handy—and locking myself in, laid down on the bed a bit, for I was regularly tired out. However, when I had done my nap, I found my way to your room, and here I am safe and sound. But I suppose," he added, with another grin and ironical leer, "you can't guess why I am sitting here chattering to you in this familiar style? In the first place it's because this wine has put me into a little better humour than I was just now; and in the second place because you are my mistress, and so I want to put ourselves on an intimate and comfortable footing together."

Ernestina's countenance grew haggard and ghastly to a degree as the Public Executioner thus spoke; and as she raised her eyes in mingled entreaty, horror, and uncertainty towards him, all the intensity of her varied feelings was depicted with a frightful eloquence in her looks.

"Well, and what are you thinking of, then?" he demanded with brutal abruptness. "You must not give way to regret and so on, or else it will spoil your beauty. And mind, your's is a beauty of which I shall be very proud when I introduce you to all my particular friends."

"Eternal God!" shrieked Lady Ernestina, suddenly shaking herself in a paroxysm of hysterical frenzy: "is it possible that all this can be true—that I hear aright?"

"True? of course it is! Why the devil shouldn't it be? But come—I will give you a proof of my love and affection."

Thus speaking, and with a horrible chuckling laugh, the Hangman, who was somewhat under the influence of the two bottles of wine which he had drunk, rose from his chair—accosted Ernestina—and stooping down, began covering her face with kisses. She struggled — O heavens! she struggled as if it were a huge boa-constrictor that was thus slobbering her with its forked tongue previous to the process of deglutition: but she was so bound in the chair and her arms were secured in such a manner that she could afford no effectual resistance; and as to screaming out, her powers of utterance were either absorbed in the horror of her feelings, or else the few stifled cries which might perhaps have found vent were kept down by the brutal kisses of the monster.

"Now, don't you think I am an affectionate kind of fellow?" he asked. "But come—it's time we should be off:"—and with these words he loosened the towels which held her ladyship in the chair.

Panting and gasping from the half smothering effects of the caresses he had bestowed upon her, and with a deep inward sense of self-loathing—wretched too, O wretched beyond all possibility of description—Ernestina had scarcely consciousness or energy left to think at all. But when the ruffian bade her rise, with an intimation that she was to depart in his company, she looked up into his face in a manner of anxious inquiry.

"Well, I suppose I spoke intelligibly enough," he growlingly observed: "and if not, I can soon make you understand. You are going away with me to be my mistress—to live with me—no, not exactly to live with me, 'cause why, it wouldn't do to take you to the same house where Sally Melmoth is. But I will put you into a nice comfortable lodging over in Bermondsey——"

"Monster—wretch—villain!" exclaimed Ernestina, now starting from the chair to which she was no longer bound: "let this scene end at once!"

"Well then, it will end in this manner," cried the Hangman, snatching up his clasp-knife from the table and raising the ghastly gleaming blade above Ernestina's head.

"Mercy, mercy!" she ejaculated, falling upon her knees: for there was something frightful in the aspect of that hideous knife.

"Now listen, while I say just a few last words," exclaimed Coffin.

"Last words?" repeated Ernestina, trembling all over as she knelt before him: for it struck her that this phrase was indicative of her doom.

"You are a fool—I don't want to hurt you, unless you make me," resumed the Hangman. "But what

I mean to say is just simply this. Twice have you done your best to make an end of me—once when you thought you was sticking a dagger into me on Westminster Bridge; and last night, or rather this morning, when you shoved me into the chair. If I didn't mean to be revenged, I shouldn't be flesh and blood. But I *do* mean revenge—and that is by making you my mistress. Or else I will send every inch of this blade through that lovely bosom of your's, down into your very heart. So now decide."

Ernestina remained upon her knees, but with her hands no longer outstretched nor her looks upraised. Her arms fell before her, and her head drooped on her bosom, giving her the air of a kneeling penitent. She was abandoning herself to despair: the stupor of dismay was coming over her;—her ideas were growing confused—her senses seemed to be leaving her.

"Now then, get up—dress yourself—and let us depart," said the Hangman.

But no response was given him—and the unhappy lady, already upon her knees, fell with her face downward upon the floor, where she lay senseless.

When she awoke to consciousness again, she was lying on the bed, and the Hangman was sprinkling water on her face. A conviction that she had experienced fresh outrage struck her as if with a death-blow!

"You are killing me—I am dying!" she murmured in a faint voice: but still was there an expression of ineffable horror in her looks as she averted them from the Hangman's countenance.

"Oh! that's all nonsense," he exclaimed. "Women don't die like this. Besides, you are young, and strong, and healthy enough. If it was the Prince that was with you, you wouldn't be dying with anything unless it was pleasure: but because a genelman of my profession has took a fancy to you——"

"Oh! if you have any compassion left—if you have any feeling in your heart," moaned the wretched Ernestina, "leave me—I am dying!"

The Hangman grew frightened. Even while Ernestina was giving faint and feeble utterance to these last words, he was struck by the visible change which had come over her; and there was also something that alarmed him in the tone of her voice. Yet he was undecided how to act. To leave her then and there, was to abandon the vengeance which he had resolved to wreak: and how could he give up all idea of revenge for what he considered to be the wrongs he had experienced? That he was already sufficiently avenged by the brutal outrages perpetrated on the unhappy lady, he did not think. He sought to drag her through all the mire, pollution, and filth of a brothel in Bermondsey: for it was only by the consummate degradation of the high-born, titled, and beautiful lady that his fiendish malice and diabolic vindictiveness could be appeased.

While he was standing by the side of the couch, uncertain how to act, Ernestina had averted her countenance; and shading her eyes with one of her white hands, she lay as if in extremities—her breath coming with quick uneasy gaspings, and all the lower part of her countenance looking as if the seal of death were already impressed upon it.

"Come now, what does this mean?" demanded the Hangman gruffly, endeavouring as it were to conceal his fears even from himself beneath a display of his savage temper. "What's the matter with you?"

"I tell you I am dying," answered Ernestina in a voice that was scarcely audible. "Heaven! will you not suffer me to die in peace?"

Daniel Coffin was now too seriously alarmed to permit him to remain undecided any longer; and thinking that the best course he could adopt would be to take his departure as promptly as possible, he without another word snatched up his hat, flung it upon his head, and stole forth from the room. Descending the stairs, he boldly traversed the hall; and the moment the porter emerged from his great leathern sentry-box in which he was wont to sit and doze, Coffin said, "I'm a friend of Mr. Brockman's."

The porter recollected having seen the Hangman before, but still he could not help gazing suspiciously upon him. Coffin accordingly drew the crow-bar out of his pocket, and gave the domestic a tap on the head which at once stretched him senseless on the marble floor of the hall.

The Hangman escaped from the house without any farther molestation; and several minutes elapsed before the hall-porter came to himself. He then raised an alarm that some robber had been in the house; and as the servants rushed about in all directions, the maid appointed to wait on Ernestina sped to her room. There she found her ladyship dangerously ill: but nothing could equal the young woman's amazement when she beheld the dishes completely cleared and the decanters emptied.

"Heavens! the robbers have been here!" she exclaimed in surprise and alarm.

Lady Ernestina Dysart, now recovering partially, and perceiving the necessity of telling some tale, at once corroborated the maid's belief—representing that she had fallen into a swoon on discovering a robber in her room, and that she was only now beginning to shake off the effects of the terrific fright she had sustained.

In this manner was not only the absence of the supper accounted for, but likewise the serious illness which Lady Ernestina experienced.

CHAPTER CLXXX.

CONCLUSION OF THE HISTORY OF SELLIS.

The scene shifts once more to Windsor Castle; and it is the same evening of which we have been writing.

The reader will not have forgotten a certain Mrs. Bredalbane, occupying the post of one of the Royal Bedchamber Women: and if we peep into this lady's own room in the castellated palace, at about ten o'clock, we shall find her seated *tete-à-tete* with Mrs. Arbuthnot, who held a similar appointment. These two ladies had become great friends and confidants; and when not required to be in personal attendance on the Queen, they were wont to have a cup of tea or a pleasant little supper together in order to discuss all the scandal of the palace.

On the present occasion they were seated at the supper-table. The repast was over: but they were enjoying themselves with a glass of *liqueur*, while

indulging in some of their favourite topics of discourse.

"Yes, my dear friend," said Mrs. Bredalbane, pursuing the thread of some previous remarks which she had been making, "I can assure you the Princess persecutes me to death upon this subject; and that is what you beheld her talking to me so earnestly about in the Park this morning."

"But how is it," inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that her Royal Highness should be so anxious to learn the history of Sellis's mysterious death?"

"You might say *murder* if you chose!" observed Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Indeed! are you so positive on that head?" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"I am," was the response. "Of all the topics whereon you and I have so frequently conversed, I do believe that the Sellis business is the only one left untouched by us——"

"And it is precisely that which has suddenly assumed an important degree of interest in my eyes," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot, "after what you have told me relative to the young Princess Charlotte. But how came her Royal Highness to be aware that you, of all the ladies at Court, were better instructed in this mysterious transaction than any one else?"

"I will tell you how it happened," said Mrs. Bredalbane. "Poor dear Lady Prescott, whose melancholy death at Geneva has so recently appeared in the papers, was a bosom friend of mine; and one evening we were talking familiarly together, in the same way as you and I at the present moment. The conversation turned upon the Sellis affair; and I was induced to commence the narrative of the dread occurrence. Little suspecting who overheard me, I had nearly finished the recital, when all of a sudden the astounding fact became revealed to us that the Princess Charlotte was a listener; and, as she subsequently confessed, she had caught every syllable—that is to say, as far as I had advanced in the narrative."

"Dear me, how very awkward!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Was that long ago?"

"Yes—some months—just before Lady Prescott resigned and was succeeded by you. From that moment has the Princess constantly plagued and persecuted me to tell her the remainder of the narrative: but it is of a nature which, strictly speaking, cannot possibly be revealed to so young a person."

"Is it then of so very peculiar a character?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a display of curiosity that was significant enough.

"Ah! my dear friend, if you only heard it," exclaimed Mrs Bredalbane, "you would indeed agree with me that I cannot—must not—dare not comply with the young Princess's request. I have accordingly managed to put her off from time to time with a variety of excuses: but this morning she told me frankly enough she did not think that I intended to fulfil my promise at all. That was when you saw her looking so cross—firing up indeed, in her truly royal manner," added Mrs. Bredalbane, whose head was filled with courtly ideas to which her tongue could only give utterance in a courtly sense. "But after all, she is a sweet good-natured Princess; and if she were *not* a Princess, we should speak of her as a most amiable creature."

"But this story of Sellis?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Come, my dear friend, I do not suppose that you have any reserve with me?"

"Very far from it," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "It would indeed be very wrong of me to keep any secrets from you, after the implicit confidence which you have placed in me. Not but that I should have penetrated the intimacy subsisting between your charming daughter Penelope and the Prince, even if you had not whispered in my ear that such an intimacy did really exist. But if Penelope should prove in the family-way, as you fear——"

"*Fear* is not perhaps exactly the word, my good friend," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot: "because the existence of issue from this amour would always prove a sort of tie——You understand me?" she observed significantly.

"Without a doubt," answered Mrs. Bredalbane: "and I do not know which to admire the most—the truly woman-of-the-world way in which you take your daughter's connexion with the Prince, or the precision with which you estimate the results. Ah! my dear friend, I have seen so many, many strange things within these walls——But while I think of it, let me observe that if Penelope *should* prove with child, I can recommend an excellent and trustworthy female, at whose house she can go into retirement——"

"A thousand thanks for the interest you take in the matter," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But pray do let me bring back your attention to that topic which for the present moment has an absorbing interest for me—I mean the affair of Sellis."

"Well then, I will give you that narrative," answered Mrs. Bredalbane. "You are well aware that the transaction took place during the night between the 31st of May and the 1st of June, 1810—therefore upwards of five years ago. The Duke of Cumberland was then living, as he is now, in the Kitchen Court of St. James's Palace. He had three valets—Neale, Sellis, and Joux. The first-mentioned was an Englishman—the second an Italian—and the third a Frenchman. Neale was a very ordinary-looking person: Sellis was a dark-complexioned and rather handsome man;—Joux was thin and pale-faced, neatly made, and admirably fitted for a valet. Sellis was an excellent man—quiet, but cheerful—by no means forward in his manners—never excited nor yet dispirited—but always preserving an equanimity of temper. He was married and had four children—his family being accommodated with lodgings over the gateway leading from Cleveland Row into the Kitchen Court. He had also his own room in the close vicinage of the Duke's suite of apartments, and, if you can understand me, there was a passage leading from this room to the Duke's bed-chamber, and another passage leading into the lodgings over the gateway. Adjoining the Duke's room was the one occupied by Neale when on duty."

"I understand perfectly," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Pray proceed."

"It was about seven o'clock in the evening of the 31st of May," continued Mrs. Bredalbane, "that Sellis repaired to Neale's room for the pur-

pose of saying something to him. They were accustomed, with the familiarity usually subsisting between dependants in the same household, to enter each other's rooms at any time without the ceremony of knocking; and therefore, on this occasion of which I am speaking, Sellis entered Neale's apartment without any warning. But he at once beheld something which made him start back in dismay, and give vent to the exclamation of '*Heavens! the Princess Augusta!*' Flying along the passage, back to his own room, Sellis ran against Joux, who happened to be there at the moment and who heard with much astonishment the singular ejaculation which burst from his lips. He was equally surprised at Sellis's hasty and confused manner; and the more so when with a strange wildness of look he said to him, '*You cannot possibly go to Neale's room; for he is engaged!*' He then took Joux along with him into his lodgings, and kept him in conversation for about an hour. Joux then retired, naturally wondering at the incident which I have described, but of which Sellis volunteered not the least explanation, nor even alluded to it in the presence of his wife. As one of Sellis's children was ill and it was arranged that the little invalid shou'd sleep with its mother, Sellis had decided upon passing the night in his own room belonging to the ducal suite of apartments. Accordingly, at ten o'clock on that memorable night, he embraced his wife and children with his wonted affection, and then retired to his chamber."

The Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane paused for a few moments to replenish her glass of *liqueur*, an example which Mrs. Arbuthnot readily followed; and this being done, the former lady resumed her narrative in the ensuing terms:—

"It was half-past two in the morning, when the cry of murder rang through that portion of St. James's Palace. All was speedily confusion and

alarm. The Duke of Cumberland was in his night-shirt, covered with blood—Neale was with him—and in a very short time all the domestics were aroused from their beds. Joux was one of the first to speed to the Duke's chamber; and it was he who was also the first to discover that Sellis was no more. It appears that on hastening to call the Italian, Joux was horror-stricken on finding the unfortunate man lying on the bed with his throat cut from ear to ear—indeed, in so horrible a manner that his head was all but severed from his body. Advancing nearer to the couch, Joux presently observed a sheet of paper lying on the floor. It was a partially-finished letter, in the handwriting of Sellis; and being in the shade of a chest of drawers, from which it had evidently fallen, it might easily have escaped the superficial notice of any one entering that room. Indeed Joux himself had not remarked it until looking more attentively about the scene of horror; so that it is not to be wondered at if it failed to catch the eyes of the murderer in the hurry, confusion, and excitement necessarily attendant on the perpetration of so appalling a crime. Joux hastily ran his eye over the first few lines; and these were to him a sudden revelation! He understood it all: but finding himself thus in a single moment the possessor of a fearful secret, he felt an unknown terror come over him. It seemed as if a warning voice whispered in his ear, '*Take heed lest you share the same fate!*' For he saw in an instant that Sellis had been murdered on account of this same secret which had just come into his possession; and as he beheld the awful spectacle of the butchered Italian stretched before him, an ice-chill struck to his heart with a presentiment of what his own doom might be. Hastily thrusting, therefore, the letter into his pocket, he was induced by his terrors to place a seal upon his lips. You may rest assured that he sought the earliest opportunity to lock himself up in his own room and read the letter which accident had placed in his possession. I will now show you that document itself."

"What? the very letter!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, in astonishment: "is it in your possession?"

"It is," was the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane's reply: then rising from her seat, she fetched her writing-desk from a side-table, and producing a number of papers, searched amongst them for the required document.

This she soon found; and taking it from the envelope in which it was carefully preserved, she handed it to Mrs. Arbuthnot. The writing was in the peculiar cramped hand characterising foreign penmanship: the lines had evidently been traced under circumstances of considerable excitement, and there was every sign to prove that the letter was merely a draught whence a fair copy was to be made, as there were many erasures, corrections, and interlineations. Indeed, it was by no means an easy task to decipher the writing at all: but at length, with Mrs. Bredalbane's assistance, Mrs. Arbuthnot was enabled to make out the contents in the following manner:—

"For my own sake, I must declare that it was through no motive of impertinent curiosity I entered the room just now. Indeed, I had not a suspicion that aught of evil was going on. But heavens! what did I behold? Yourself and the Princess Augusta in each other's arms, leaving not a doubt as to the criminality of the scene. I am amazed—astounded—horrified. I know not what to do. Without any affectation of sickly sentimentalism, I may be permitted to declare myself a lover of virtue. At all events my ideas of propriety are such that I have experienced a shock which will never be forgotten. I have dissembled my feelings in the presence of my wife—in the presence of Joux also. I have endeavoured to be calm; but it was the external surface of the volcano, while the fire was agitating within! I am incapable of concealing the true state of my feelings much longer. Henceforth, whenever I might see you—whenever I might behold the Princess Augusta—and whenever, too, I might hear your names mentioned, my countenance would betray the fact that in the deep caverns of my soul a dread secret was deposited. If questioned—especially if pressed by my wife—what could I say? Subterfuge—falsehood——No, no! I hate untruth! Besides, I could not make all the rest of my life one continuous incessant lie, for the sake of veiling this hideous secret which personally concerns me not. What then is to be done? I assuredly do not ever wish to be dragged into a revelation, nor yet be surprised into a betrayal, of this tremendous secret. My only course is to leave St. James's—to seek some other service: and by being thus removed from the presence of those whom this secret so nearly concerns, I may not be forced every day, and every hour, to find myself blushing or turning pale, and having to invent some falsehood as an excuse for my emotions.

"My mind therefore is made up. I shall leave to-morrow. My child's illness will serve as an excuse: the doctor said something to-day about the sea-side. This then will serve to account for my sudden resolve—a resolve which is now unchangeable.

"If I write to you thus, addressing you by no name—it is that I cannot bring myself to pay even the most ordinary courtesy to one who * * *

* * * * * *
* * * * *

Here the letter abruptly broke off: but it was evident that, so much as there was of it, its contents had produced a deep impression upon Mrs. Arbuthnot's mind.

"What think you of that document?" asked Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Before I offer a single comment," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, "be pleased to finish your narrative:"—and as she thus spoke, her manner was grave and her look serious to a degree.

"I have but little more to say," continued the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane. "You may readily suppose that Joux, on perusing this letter, was strangely excited; and if on the spur of the moment he had deemed it prudent to abstain from declaring what he knew or producing the document, he was now more than ever confirmed in the adoption of that course. The inquest took place; and as a matter of course the evidence, such as it was, had been cooked up so as to have but one tendency—namely, to fix the stigma of self-destruction upon Sellis. A verdict was returned accordingly; and the unfortunate Italian was not only branded as a base cowardly assassin—the midnight assailant of a kind and benevolent master—but also as a miserable suicide!"

"And what about Joux?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"He managed to keep himself out of the way at the moment when the evidence of the domestics and others was being taken down in writing to be ultimately submitted to the Coroner's jury: and soon afterwards he quitted the service of his Royal Highness. He then entered my household as butler, my husband being at that time alive and our residence in Mount Street. In the course of a short

time I observed that Joux had evidently something on his mind; and knowing of course that he had been in the service of the Duke of Cumberland, I fancied that he might have picked up some piece of Court scandal, or have become a party in some not over-nice transaction connected with high life. To these suppositions I was led by a word or two which at times he inadvertently dropped; and at length I pressed him on the subject. He then told me all these particulars relative to Sellis and the letter, which I have been describing to you, and which have never been made public. He gave me the letter: he even appeared delighted to get rid of it; and yet he assured me that some superstitious feeling had always prevented him from destroying it whenever he entertained the idea. He left me at length to 'better himself,' as the phrase goes; and I know not what has become of him."

"But what was *his* opinion relative to the whole affair?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot, fixing upon her friend a keen and searching look.

"What could he think, otherwise than that Sellis had discovered an amorous intrigue existing between the Princess Augusta and the valet Neale; and that fearful of being betrayed and ruined, Neale murdered Sellis, and then, in order to shield himself, penetrated into the Duke of Cumberland's room—wounded his Royal Highness—and fled—of course leaving it to be supposed that Sellis was the assailant."

"And you believe all this relative to Neale?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"To be sure I do," replied Mrs. Bredalbane. "Surely you do not fancy that Joux forged this letter, and that his whole story being a fiction, Sellis was really an intended robber and murderer, and an actual suicide?"

"No—I believe every syllable of the story told by Joux," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I also feel convinced that this letter is genuine, though without signature, imperfect, and unfinished. I therefore believe that Sellis was murdered: but I do *not* believe that Neale was the murderer!"

"Good heavens! what *do* you believe?" exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane, with a frightened regard.

"Tell me what was the impression that Joux entertained on the subject?" inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"I do not remember that he ever specifically and in so many words explained his opinion," said Mrs. Bredalbane. "He told me the narrative—gave me the letter—and suffered me to draw my own inference; which I did, supposing it to be the same that he himself had already deduced from the facts themselves."

"Depend upon it," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot, shaking her head solemnly, "that the impression Joux formed was very different from the one which you, my dear friend, received."

"Good heavens! I begin to entertain a dreadful suspicion," cried Mrs. Bredalbane.

"And my wonder is that you did not entertain it long ago," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Look calmly and dispassionately at all the facts. Why was Joux so overpowered with alarm on discovering the secret? Because he read the frightful truth in a moment! Had he believed Neale—a humble and obscure domestic—to have been the murderer, he would not have feared to proclaim this belief. But it was because he comprehended the whole of that awful mystery——"

"For God's sake, take care of what you say!" interrupted Mrs. Bredalbane, casting an anxious glance around, as if the faces of listeners might peer forth from the very walls: then she rose and looked forth from the door to satisfy herself that there were no eaves-droppers.

"It is impossible," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot when Mrs. Bredalbane had resumed her seat, "to shut one's eyes against the truth—startling, horrifying, and astounding though it be—which stands forth patent and visible from amidst all the facts before us. The belief that Neale was the murderer involves the clumsiest theory. How could he be ruined and undone because a Royal lady bestowed her favours on him? Would *she* not screen him? would *she* not provide for him! Where was the necessity to murder Sellis? Think you that the Princess herself would have counselled him to the deed? And then, if your theory makes him the murderer of Sellis, it must make him also the assailant of the Duke. But why suppose him committing one unnecessary crime in order to veil another? It would have been an act of sheer madness on Neale's part; and the theory is not tenable for a moment."

"Then who—who"—asked Mrs. Bredalbane, scarcely daring to allow her lips to form the query which all her suspicions now naturally suggested.

"My dear friend, between you and me," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "there is not the slightest necessity to mince matters. We are alone—we shall not betray each other—and we may therefore speak without reserve. This then is my opinion—my firm opinion—the opinion to which I came while reading Sellis's letter——"

"And that opinion?" asked Mrs. Bredalbane.

"Is that Ernest Duke of Cumberland was guilty of incest with his sister the Princess Augusta, and was himself the murderer of Sellis!"

Such was the answer that Mrs. Arbuthnot gave in a firm and solemn voice: and then a long pause ensued.

"Yes—it must be so," said Mrs. Bredalbane, at length breaking silence and speaking in a musing tone. "I comprehend it all now! That letter was intended to have been sent to the Duke of Cumberland; whereas until this night I have always imagined that it was meant for Neale. Poor Sellis! he must have been endowed with fine and even noble feelings indeed. That such was the case his letter fully proves!"

"And in imagination," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "one may penetrate into the solitude of his chamber on that fearful night. I fancy that I can see him, carried along by a torrent of irresistible feelings excited by the fearful crime of incest which he had witnessed, taking up his pen to give expression to those feelings in a letter to his Royal master—that master whom he evidently considered to have forfeited all claim to respect and deference! Then may we imagine him throwing down his pen—perhaps even tossing the paper itself impatiently aside, so that it fell down in the corner where Joux picked it up—and throwing himself, half-dressed as he was, upon the bed, exhausted by the fearful excitement of his overwrought feelings. But Ah! now comes the awful

phase of the tremendous drama! The door opens—the Duke of Cumberland steals in—Sellis sleeps—and from that sleep there is to be no waking. The frightful deed is done; and forth from that room goes the Duke—a murderer! Aye, and what is more too, he must have been a cold-blooded assassin; for on his return to his own room, he had the presence of mind to perform the part which was to give a colour and complexion to the whole affair—I mean those wounds which he must have inflicted upon himself——"

"But the medical evidence," interrupted Mrs. Bredalbane, "proved that the wounds were serious."

"Granting that they were," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot, "may we not suppose that the Duke inflicted them a little more severely than he perhaps intended?—or that being a bold and desperate man, he calculated full well that the more severely he punished himself the more certain was he to avert suspicion from his own door? Or again, the medical evidence may have been exaggerated and overstrained."

"Is it not an awful subject?" asked Mrs. Bredalbane, as she replaced the unfinished letter of the murdered Sellis in her writing-desk.

"It is a tremendous and a fearful episode in the history of the Royal Family," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot: "and I think that you now will be more than ever cautious how you appease the curiosity of the Princess Charlotte."

CHAPTER CLXXXI.

THE DOOMED WOMAN.

RETURN we once more to Geneva, the scene of so many and startling incidents already chronicled in our narrative.

It was ten o'clock at night, when Jocelyn Loftus rang the bell at the entrance of the gloomy prison. The gate was immediately opened by the porter, who inquired his business.

"I wish to see the Englishwoman named Ranger, who is to die to-morrow," was the answer given by our hero.

"It is too late, sir," replied the porter. "The prison hours——"

"Here!" said Loftus, producing a paper from his pocket. "It is an order from the Syndics to admit me."

The man glanced his eye over the paper, bowed with much respect, and said, "Have the kindness, sir, to follow me."

Thus speaking, the porter conducted our hero along the gloomy passage, which was dimly lighted by an iron lamp suspended to the ceiling: and turning into another stone corridor he led him into a large room, where a turnkey, two or three of the prison watchmen, and the serjeant of the guard stationed within the walls of the establishment, were lounging upon benches, smoking their pipes and drinking the small wine of the country. The porter gave the written order to the turnkey, who forthwith took up a lantern and requested Jocelyn to accompany him. The porter returned to his lodge at the gate, and our hero followed the turnkey through the apartment into another long passage on the farther side. They then traversed a large courtyard surrounded by the lofty buildings constituting that particular division of the gaol. But in one window only did a light shine.

"That is where the three men are who are to be guillotined to-morrow along with Mrs. Ranger," said the turnkey. "The priest is with them—for they are all three Catholics: and they are allowed a light in their cell."

"And how do they bear themselves?" asked Loftus: "for I was told yesterday that they are thoroughly reckless and impenitent."

"There!" said the turnkey: "that is a proof!"—and he drew Jocelyn beneath the barred window of the cell, where they both paused for a few moments.

The three men were singing—not a hymn, but a bacchanalian song; and then suddenly breaking off with a loud laugh, they began flinging taunts and ribald jests at the priest. Then arose however the voice of that pious man enjoining them to listen to the words he had to speak: but again they broke forth into a coarse guffaw; and Jocelyn, with a cold tremor passing throughout his frame, whispered to the turnkey, "This is horrible! for heaven's sake let us move on."

"Think you," asked the prison functionary, as he proceeded to conduct our hero across the yard, "that those men will continue thus until the last? I do not. My experience is against such a belief."

"And I also think," answered Jocelyn,—"and indeed I hope for their own sake, that there was something false, hollow, and unnatural in their dreadful mirth. It sounded like the desperate attempt of men to drown care in a forced excitement."

"Just so," rejoined the turnkey. "But here we are in the women's division."

While thus speaking, the prison-official had opened a door leading into a second courtyard; and here also one light was alone seen shining through the window of a cell on the ground-floor. The turnkey opened another door, which led into the building; and conducting our hero along a gloomy passage, where their footsteps raised echoes that had a fearful and ominous sound, he presently stopped at a door through the chinks of which a feeble glimmering shone forth.

"Do you wish to see her alone?" he asked, in a subdued whisper. "Just as you like."

"Yes—alone," replied Loftus. "Is any one with her now?"

"No: she desired the clergyman—for she has a Protestant minister attending upon her—to return at midnight. I shall walk up and down in the passage until you come forth again."

Thus speaking, he drew back the bolts and unfastened the chain of the massive door: the key grated horribly in the lock—and the next moment Jocelyn passed into the cell. The door closed behind him; and he was now alone with Mrs. Ranger.

She was sitting upon the mean and sordid pallet stretched on a rough wooden bedstead: a candle stood upon a small table; and its light, dim and flickering, added to the ghastliness of the wretched woman's appearance. Heavens! how altered was she. The ravages of old age had been fearfully aggravated by the corroding influences of dire anguish and ineffable horror during the last few

weeks; and those ravages were no longer disguised by the abundant use of cosmetics and succedaneous artifices. No rouge, nor pearl-powder, nor refreshing lotions mitigated or disguised the hideousness of the wretched woman's countenance: her skin was like wrinkled parchment upon her fleshless cheeks; her neck was scraggy and sallow even to loathsomeness;—her eyes seemed set in deep caverns. She had either lost, or else no longer chose to wear, her false teeth; and her mouth had therefore fallen in. Her nose was frightfully thin, so that her profile had all the angular sharpness of old age, unredeemed by any of that benevolent or placid expression which at such a time of life so often prevents the countenance from being revoltingly ugly. Her hair still retained the black dye wherewith she had stained it at one of the latest toilettes which she performed at the villa: but inasmuch as it had grown somewhat during her imprisonment, it was all perfectly white for about a third of an inch at the roots—a circumstance that added to the hideousness of her appearance. Altogether she seemed the vilest and most loathsome wreck of humanity upon which Jocelyn Loftus ever set his eyes.

The moment he entered the cell he found her looks fixed upon him. She had been gazing at the door while it opened; and there was a species of reptile-like glistening in her sunken eyes. Loftus could not help shuddering as he thus encountered the looks of the wretched woman. When he had last seen her, it was a fortnight back in the court of justice where she and her three accomplices were tried: but *then* she wore a bonnet and was closely veiled, so that he had not on that occasion observed the change which was taking place in her looks. *Now* he saw her without bonnet, without cap, and without veil,—her thin lank hair hanging down on her scraggy shoulders, and her lean shrivelled form wrapped in a gown which hung as loosely upon her as if in mockery wrapping a skeleton. He was shocked—he staggered back from the revolting spectacle: he could not conceal his disgust even if it had killed her upon the spot—and she not only noticed his manner but also comprehended the reason of it.

"You find me much changed, Mr. Loftus?" she said; and her voice, no longer aided by the false teeth, was mumbling and almost inarticulate.

"I did not expect to find you looking cheerful and happy," responded our hero, instantly recovering himself and speaking in that gentle tone which was consistent with the generosity of his character: for he would not willingly enhance the pain which he knew full well the wretched woman must experience. "Indeed, I should have been very sorry to find you looking as you were wont to do; because *that* would have bespoken a hardness of heart which under circumstances——"

"Ah, under circumstances!" she repeated quickly, and with greater strength of voice than before—as if the anguish of her feelings gave a power to her articulation. "Good God! and *what circumstances?* Death! death! The guillotine waiting for me—O horror! the guillotine!"—and clasping her hands, that were skinny and skeleton-like, she quivered and shook with a convulsive trembling from head to foot.

Jocelyn Loftus placed himself on a stool that was near the table, and said in a low and agitated voice, "Are you not prepared to die?"

"My God! can you put that question?" she exclaimed hysterically: and her eyes actually glared from their caverned sockets, which were of a bluish, almost livid tint. "I sent for you to say that you must save me!"

Loftus shook his head with mournful slowness.

"Why do you do that?" she demanded abruptly and with a short gasp, as if her utterance were nearly choked: "why do you do that?"

"Can you not understand my meaning?" he said. "I was told that you were resigned—that you welcomed the visits of the good clergymen whom the authorities have allowed to penetrate to your cell. I had hoped that his pious ministrations had prepared you."

"Oh! if all he says be true, what can I hope—where shall I go?" cried the wretched woman, her attenuated form again shaken by a convulsive shudder. "He speaks to me of heaven and hell—of a heaven full of happiness and a hell formed of a burning lake——Ah! and I have seen it in my dreams too! Oh, the fierce flames, the molten fire, the raging sea of red hot brimstone!"

"But the minister has likewise told you that God is merciful, and that there is hope for the penitent?" said Loftus.

"Yes: but what surety have I that crimes like mine can be forgiven? Murder! Oh, it is the foulest, the most horrible of all black deeds! The blood of the victim sticks to one: all I see is blood red! I behold you now through a crimson tint! It is horrible, horrible!"—and the wretched woman covered her eyes with her fleshless hands, the veins of which were like knotted cords underneath the skin.

Jocelyn felt assured that her brain was touched—that her senses were impaired. He knew not what to say, or how to deal with the miserable creature under such circumstances.

"Well, what are you doing here?" she suddenly exclaimed, removing her hands from her shrivelled countenance: "unless you have come to save me. You have the power—I know you have! A word from you to the Syndicate will have the effect. Besides, you *must* save me! I cannot die—I am not prepared to die! I am old, and could not live long according to my natural span. Surely, surely it would be no great boon to accord me the year or two of existence which in the course of things would be mine? Let me be locked up in prison all the time: I do not ask to go out, but I ask to live! Heavens, I can do no more harm in this world! There is no scope for mischief in this dreadful place. Look around!—a strong man in all his youthful vigour could not tear down those huge bars from the windows, nor break open that thick door, nor remove one single stone from the mass of masonry which makes these walls impenetrable as marble. Then, is it rational to fear that a poor crushed, broken-down, enfeebled wretch like me could escape hence? No, no. Then why take my life?—why?"

"Mrs. Ranger," answered Jocelyn Loftus, "I beseech you to tranquillise yourself, and to listen to me. This afternoon a message was left by the Protestant clergyman at the Hotel where I am staying, to the effect that you wished to see me, if only for a few moments. I was not within at the time: I did not return to the Hotel until an hour ago. It was

then nine o'clock. I could not disregard the prayer of a fellow-creature whose hours in this world are numbered——"

"But why enter into such particulars?" demanded Mrs. Ranger impatiently. "These things are trivial—Oh! trivial to a degree, in comparison with the immense importance of my position. Let us talk, then, only on what can be done to save me."

"I pray you to listen," continued Loftus, impressively. "I was about to inform you that I went to the principal Syndic to beseech a written order to visit you at once. I saw him—and he complied with my request. I asked him if——"

"If what?" demanded the wretched woman with almost frenzied impatience: for she now guessed what was coming.

"I asked him, I ssy, whether there was any intention to commute your sentence," continued Loftus, with deepening solemnity of tone, "and he declared that the law must take its course."

"He did not!—it is false!" exclaimed Mrs. Ranger, her features convulsing most hideously with a sort of frenzied rage as she spoke. "You only say this to avoid taking any farther trouble in my behalf. You want to see me perish dreadfully on the scaffold. It is you who have done it all. Had you never come to Geneva to interfere with my plans, I should not have been led into the circumstances which have made me what I am and have placed me here. Cruel and heartless that you are—pitiless and implacable—it is *you* who have hunted me to the very death!"

"Mrs. Ranger," answered Loftus, in a mournful tone, "I cannot be angry with one in your condition. But you must recollect that you prepared all this sad destiny for yourself. Wherefore did you ever embark in a course which was likely to conduct you, you knew not whither? But God forbid that I should reproach you now! Great as your sins have been, your punishment is also great—great enough indeed, I hope, to be an atonement: but it is my duty to assure you that with the affairs of earth you have no farther concern."

"Oh! forgive me, forgive me, my dear young man, if I said any thing to offend you. I did not mean it! But there are moments when I know not what I say or do: my brain seems to be on fire—it is in a dreadful whirl! But tell me, tell me, that you will yet save me? Think of the horrors of such a death. My God! I shall go wild if I dare contemplate it. Mr. Loftus, you *must* save me——I cannot die! If they come to take me, I will scratch—I will scream—I will fly at the ruffians like a tiger-cat. Oh! I will do a mischief!"—and she laughed with a horrible frenzy.

"Do you not think that I had better go and fetch the clergyman to you once more?" asked Loftus, cruelly bewildered by this awful scene.

"No: he is of no use to me now," was the wretched woman's quick response: then she paused—slowly bent down her eyes—and appeared to reflect profoundly. "Many, many years ago," she at length said,—and now she spoke in a strangely altered voice—a voice in which there was a low and mournful pathos,—"a sweet little girl was gambolling and skipping about in a beautiful garden full of fruits and flowers. Let us contemplate that dear innocent child when she was about five or six years old. What blushing roses were upon her cheeks! what lily-purity upon her brow! Her dark brown hair flowed in myriads of clusters over her white neck and shoulders. What joy danced in her sunny eyes! what silver peals of mirth rolled forth from her red lips! and how glancingly did her tiny feet trip over the lawn, along the gravel walks, and amidst the parterres of flowers! And that little child, so gay, so innocent, so good, was a fond mother's darling. The mother was a widow; and this child was her treasure and her comfort. Behold that dear kind mother coming forth from the picturesque cottage to which the garden belongs; and how that child bounds towards her! The butterfly wandering from flower to flower is not more happy than this young child. The melody of birds in the trees of that garden is not more delicious than the music of the child's mirth as its mother receives it with open arms. Oh! what a blissful scene—innocence in its own appropriate paradise! Mr. Loftus, it is a picture of my own earliest years I am giving you. That child was myself!"

As she thus spoke, Mrs. Ranger raised her eyes in a melancholy—Oh! so melancholy a manner towards Jocelyn Loftus, that his heart swelled with emotions, and he felt that the tears were trickling down his cheeks. He saw not the hideous hag before him, lean, wrinkled, and stricken by all the searing woes of age, crime, and calamity; he saw not the cold cheerless dungeon, with its massive bars, its huge door, its impenetrable walls, its stone pavement, its vaulted roof, and its rough meagre furniture: but so vividly had the picture which the woman drew been impressed upon his mind, that he beheld only that sweet little innocent child she had delineated in so strangely touching a manner, and that garden-scene with the picturesque cottage, all of which appeared a romantic and lovely reality to his mind's eye.

"But the scene changes," she went on to say, in a deeper mournfulness of voice: "a dozen years have passed—and in a sumptuously-furnished apartment a beautiful young creature of seventeen or eighteen reclines upon a sofa. Yes—she is dazzlingly beautiful. All the evidences of wealth and luxury are about her person and in that apartment. Her dress is splendid: diamonds are upon her hair—pearls encircle her neck—pearls also hang over her naked bosom—and the richest bracelets set off her snow-white arms. The door opens: a powdered lacquey enters to ask at what hour this lady will have the carriage. She gives him the required answer. Soon afterwards an elegant French lady's-maid appears to bring costly stuffs, lace veils, silks and satins, for the lady's inspection. Milliners and drapers, mercers and jewellers, send their goods or await her orders. One of the most eminent artists of the day comes to receive instructions relative to her portrait. Thus the forenoon is disposed of. Then comes a handsome man in the prime of life—tall, portly, and with a noble bearing. He is one of the proudest peers of England; and this charming creature is his mistress. He is infatuated with her: he worships, he adores her—but he is already married and has a large family, or he would make her his wife. Nevertheless, he testifies his affection by all possible means: his wealth is immense, and he is never wearied of expending his gold to surround his loved one with all the luxuries and elegancies of life—not merely to gratify her slightest whims, but

even to anticipate them. He has placed her in a splendid mansion, given her carriages and servants, and heaped upon her all the bounties, the extravagances, and the profusions which the most refined luxury or the stateliest pomp could possibly require. But she does not love him in return. She never loved him. For her fall from innocence there is not even the apology of the heart's affection. She was dazzled only by his lofty rank, his boundless wealth, and the golden promises he made her. Thoughtless and giddy, notwithstanding the admirable training which she had received under a fond mother's care, she preferred to be a proud peer's mistress rather than a poor man's bride. She was dwelling in the country when he spoke to her of the grandeur of the metropolis: the simple enjoyments of a rural life seemed monotonous to her in comparison with the glowing pleasures associated with the mere name of London. Dazzled and intoxicated by all that was told her and all that she dreamt—exited and enchanted by the words that he spoke and the pictures her imagination drew—she had fallen! Yes—she had fled from her once happy home: and behold her now, the great lord's mistress! But she loved him not. Soon however, she encountered a young man for whom she conceived a passion; and she intrigued with him. One day her noble admirer discovered her infidelity. Immense as his love had been, proportionately implacable was his vengeance now. He dispossessed her of everything he had bestowed upon her. In his rage he tore the jewels from her person, and trampled them under his foot: he then turned her forth from the splendid mansion where he had lodged her;—and all in a moment she found herself stripped of every symbol of wealth, flung down from the pinnacle of prosperity, and in the street, homeless and friendless, with but a few guineas in her pocket. Well nigh broken-hearted, she hastened to the young man whom she loved, and who had been as it were the cause of her downfall. But that very morning he had led a bride to the altar, and was away into the country to spend the honeymoon. What was the young creature to do now? She was not so thoroughly depraved as to be inaccessible to some of those tender whisperings which the voice of youthful memories breathes upward from the soul in moments such as that. Thoughts of a once happy home came vividly back to her recollection; and to her mind's eye arose the sweet picture of rural simplicity—the garden with its verdure, its gravel-walks, its parterres of flowers, and its lawn in front of the picturesque cottage. Aye, and she thought also of the fond doating mother whom she had so cruelly abandoned—that widowed mother whose joy, and darling, and treasure she had been! Back, back, then, to that scene of her childhood—that once cherished spot—that home in a far-off county! But would it be a *home* to her again? would the door open to receive her? would the widowed mother's arms be unfolded to welcome her? Yes, yes: she at least had that hope! It was a splendid carriage which had borne her away from the cottage to the metropolis: it was the stage coach now which took the fugitive back again. Pillowed on the breast of an adoring lover, had she travelled away from that cottage: alone inside the cheerless public vehicle did she retrace her way thither. It was night when she was set down in the road, at the nearest point to the house. She had to walk a mile to reach it. The night was dark: it was the winter-season—and the wind sighed amid the skeleton branches of the trees like the voices of the dead. Those sounds seemed full of weird portents to her; and she could hear her heart beat forcibly. Still she went on—and at length the cottage was reached. A light—a solitary light—was shining from a window: it was her mother's chamber. Oh! if she were ill? Heavens! the thought was intolerable; and the unhappy young creature leant against the garden-fence for support. At length she opened the gate and went in. Ah! it was no longer in innocence that she trod that ground where the steps of her childhood had played so glancingly along the gravel-walks and amidst the parterres of flowers. It was in guilt, in shame, and in degradation that with feet as heavy as lead she dragged herself to the front door. She knocked—it was opened—and the old servant, who had been for years in the place, uttered an ejaculation so wild and strange that it struck dismay for an instant to the guilty young creature's heart. But the next moment, unable to bear the agonies of suspense, she flew up-stairs—rushed into her mother's chamber—and then stood suddenly transfixed in direst horror at the spectacle which met her view. Dim and sickly was the light which burnt in the room; and an old woman was creeping about the bed, performing the last offices of a sick-nurse. But on that bed—O God! was stretched the lifeless corpse of the broken-hearted mother! and the guilty daughter suddenly gave vent to a thrilling shriek of ineffable anguish—a shriek that rang through floor and ceiling, wall and roof, and pierced the brains of those who heard it. Then she staggered forward a few steps, reeled half round, and fell heavily."

Here Mrs. Ranger paused again: and covering her face with her withered hands, she sobbed low, but with an inward convulsiveness that denoted a mortal anguish. She had narrated this second chapter in her own sad history—for it *was* her own tale she was telling—with a mournful evenness and painful continuity of tone,—not seeming exactly to address herself to Loftus, nor to have the deliberate intent of unveiling to him the secrets of her earlier life, but rather giving audible expression to the train of recollections which circumstances had now so vividly conjured up. But he listened with the deepest, deepest interest; for it was a tale which no man could hear unmoved. The tears even trickled down his cheeks, and his heart swelled with emotion; for in imagination he saw every feature, every detail, every incident of the woman's history as plainly as if it were being enacted upon a theatre, and he a spectator of the whole drama.

"Years passed away," continued Mrs. Ranger, resuming her audible musings after a deep silence of several minutes; "and during that period many were the vicissitudes which the guilty daughter had known. She had seen the remains of her mother—that mother whom her crime had murdered—deposited in the church-yard. She had seen the damp clay heaped up over the coffin: some time afterwards she had revisited the spot and had seen the grass growing upon the grave. But whenever in the deep winter's night she lay awake and

heard the winds moaning, or sighing, or raving without, she thought how cold, Oh! how cold that poor mother must be slumbering in her grave. She thought how the rude blasts would howl, and sweep in fury, stern and pitiless, bleak and chill, over the green sward and amid the tomb stones in that lone churchyard. It was to avoid such thoughts as these that she plunged headlong into dissipation. She became the mistress of one man—then the mistress of another; sometimes being heartlessly deserted or thrust off by him to whom she surrendered herself—at other times being detected in intrigue elsewhere, and discarded with bitterest reproaches—perhaps with blows. Sometimes she revelled in luxury—at others she was the occupant of a garret: now sitting down to a sumptuously-spread table—and now pledging the last article of her clothing for the wherewith to obtain a morsel of food. At length, when living for a brief interval in a somewhat more respectable manner, but upon the gold which she had received as the wages of infamy, she was courted by a worthy man in tolerable circumstances. His name was Ranger. She married him. He thought he was espousing a respectable widow, and he was confiding, indulgent, and happy. Three or four years thus passed; and she endeavoured to avoid those courses which had given her so many, many bitter experiences. But temptation came again. She was still young—still handsome; and in an evil moment she listened to the dishonourable suit of a young nobleman whom chance threw in her way. For a brief period this intrigue was carried on without the knowledge of the husband; but at length his suspicion was awakened by something he heard. For he obtained a clue to the former character of his wife: he was thus led to make inquiries, and found to his horror and dismay that it was the veriest profligate whom he had espoused! The cast-off mistress of many men—the refuse of lovers too numerous to be easily remembered—the guilty thing whose crimes had broken her mother's heart and sent that fond parent in misery and anguish to a premature grave,—such was the woman whom a respectable man in all trustfulness had taken to his heart, placed at the head of his household, and honoured with his confidence and his love! The exposure was terrific: and expelled, penniless and friendless, from the house of an outraged husband, the wretched creature found herself deserted also by the heartless noble whose fatal love had thus consummated her ruin. Poor Ranger died of a broken heart—another of her victims! But not one single shilling did he leave her in his will. It is true that her name was mentioned there—but in terms of horror and of loathing—yea, and with curses also!"

Here the condemned woman paused again. This time she covered not her face with her hands, but clasped them together, agitating them convulsively—shaking her head with nervous quickness, and giving vent to bitter lamentations expressive of the anguished memories which thus surged up into her almost frenzied brain. Jocelyn Loftus wept not now. He no longer beheld before him either the cherub-child disporting in the garden of flowers, nor the betrayed and deluded girl returning home in penitence and sorrow to crave a parent's forgiveness. But he saw before him an inveterate profligate—a vile dissolute woman—the hideous personification of every gross immorality—a wretch for whom early experiences had no salutary warnings, and who was fitted only to betray all love, all confidence, and break all affectionate hearts. He gazed upon her with a sort of mournful sternness: but she heeded him not—and after another long pause concluded her narrative in these terms:—

"Years and years have passed since Ranger died; and varied and chequered has been the existence of her whom he discarded and who was left behind him. Through all kinds of profligacy has she dragged herself—through a morass of vices, pollutions, and infamies has she floundered on—dissolute in respect to herself so long as the fire of her passions lasted and she could find lovers to share in her obscene pleasures. But such a course made her prematurely old; and as dissipation showed its fearful ravages, she became an object for loathing and disgust, instead of for admiration and love. The healthful bloom faded from her cheeks—her hair, once so redundant in its glorious beauty, grew lank and thin—her teeth fell out—her once splendid bust had become shrivelled into hideousness—her form wasted into a mere collection of bones covered by a wrinkled and sallow skin. Farewell then to all the pleasures of voluptuous delight and sensual joy for her!—and it was not the least of the punishments which she endured that her desires outlived in fevered frenzy the possibility of gratifying them. But to live—what was she to do for the means of subsistence? Having been the daughter of crime herself, she now became the mother of iniquity. Vile in its hypocrises as had been her heart, so vile in its artificialities was her person now rendered. Cosmetics, and all the falsities of the toilette, still made her presentable, if no longer loveable; and she tutored herself to adopt an air and a demeanour suited to her new avocation. Deeply versed in intrigue, but no longer able to intrigue for herself, she intrigued for others. Assuming the position of a respectable widow, she secretly became a procuress of the vilest description. Oh! if all the damsels whom she has inveigled into her meshes and betrayed to their ruin, could now stand forward and bear witness against her—if all the young virgins whom she has enticed beneath her roof and sold to the polluting embrace of lustful aristocrats and the hoary dignitaries of the Church, could now gather here and speak out—and if the tomb could send up all the victims whom her detestable machinations have helped in consigning to it, how many broken hearts would be arrayed as terrible accusers against her! Oh! the vilest brothels—the darkest dens of infamy—have seen no wrongs and beheld no injuries inflicted upon credulous damsels, more flagrant than those wrongs and those injuries which she has perpetrated in her time. Ah! was it possible that such a career could glide on tranquilly until the end?—was it natural that a life pursuing its course amidst such matchless infamies, could terminate in a peaceful death-bed and in an honoured grave? No, no. I deserve it all! Yes, the Destroyer is approaching! He comes—he comes—arrayed in more than usual terrors: he has put on all his hideousness! The grim skeleton is surrounded by every horror known beyond the grave!"

While giving utterance to these last words, the wretched woman started from the pallet—drew

herself upright—extended her long lank hands towards one corner of the cell—and fixed her glaring eyes in the same direction, as if she beheld some horrible object stationed there. Loftus likewise rose from his seat, and stepped back a pace or two as he gazed upon the doomed being with indescribable loathing and horror. He could scarcely feel any further pity on her behalf: such shocking revelations had gushed forth from her lips, like a stream of fetid, putrid feculence, that he could scarcely persuade himself he beheld before him a being possessed of a human heart. She seemed like a fiend in female shape.

"Oh, yes—the reality of my doom is now before me!" she cried in tones of rending anguish. "The scaffold awaits me—the guillotine is raised. But who are you?" she suddenly demanded, her wildly glaring eyes now resting upon Loftus. "Ah! I remember:"—and she sank back to a sitting posture upon the bed again. "I have been giving vent to all the memories which arose in my brain," she continued, in a more subdued and deliberate manner; "and you have heard, Mr. Loftus, some shocking things. But think you not that I have been punished enough? Picture to yourself all that I have endured since that dreadful night when you and Baron Bergami seized upon me in my own chamber at the Villa, and the terrible sound of *Murderess* rang in my ears!"

"Mrs. Ranger," said our hero, in a low and solemn voice, "I can only repeat the words which I uttered ere now. You have no farther concern with the affairs of this life. All the deeds of your past existence have just been revealed to my ears: perhaps this outpouring of confessions may have somewhat relieved your soul? Therefore do I beseech you, fix your thoughts only upon that solemn subject which should now prove all-engrossing——"

"What!" shrieked forth the wretched woman in the wildness of her despair; "you bid me abandon

all hope? No, no—I cannot resign myself thus to die! You must save me—you must save me!"

Loftus shook his head with slow solemnity, saying, "For the last time am I compelled to assure you that you have no hope. And now farewell."

"Stop one moment!" exclaimed the doomed creature: "I wish to ask you a few questions. Oh! do remain but another minute or two—and I will be calm—I will be calm!" she added with a visible endeavour to subdue her horrified feelings: but she shuddered all over as if an ice-blast had poured in upon her.

"Speak then—for I must leave you now, so that the clergyman may return."

"Tell me, Mr. Loftus, is not my name mentioned with curses and execrations out-of-doors?" she asked. "Will there not be an immense crowd to-morrow?"—and again she shuddered visibly. "Shall I be ill-treated on my way to—to——"

"I think not—indeed I am certain you have nothing to fear on that head. The police-officers will protect you."

"My God, my God! And those three men—are they to die also? will they be pardoned?"

"No: there is not the slightest chance of that."

"And Dr. Maravelli—what has become of him?" asked Mrs. Ranger, forcing herself to maintain a calmness which was nevertheless horrible to contemplate, because it was like the surface of ice upon a river in the depths of whose waters hideous monsters and reptiles lurk and agitate.

"Maravelli is expelled the Genevese territory," replied Jocelyn. "There was nothing against him beyond having given his assistance in an illegal manner at the birth of a child; and I had promised to do my best to save him from any serious entanglement with the law."

"And why did you promise him that?" demanded Mrs. Ranger eagerly.

"Because to a considerable extent he aided some of my plans," replied Loftus. "This I explained to the authorities, and interceded for him. They accordingly considered that justice would be satisfied by his expatriation."

"And will justice then be satisfied with nothing short of *my* death?" asked Mrs. Ranger. "Can you not—will you not intercede for me?"

"It is useless," returned Jocelyn.

"But do you wish me dead? is it your desire to hurry me to the scaffold? do you thirst for my blood?" she demanded with passionate vehemence.

"Heaven forbid!" was the quick reply. "But I am powerless in the matter. Did it rest with me," he added solemnly, "I should conceive that justice would be satisfied and outraged society should be content with dooming you to imprisonment for the remainder of your life. Indeed, that you may not carry with you to the grave a false sentiment relative to my feelings, I do not hesitate to declare that I am averse to the punishment of death altogether."

"Then, in the name of God, do something to save me—I conjure you to do something to save me!"—and Mrs. Ranger fell upon her knees at his feet, looking up towards his countenance and raising her clasped hands.

"Rise, Mrs. Ranger—rise," he said, in an earnest voice: "for I can allow no human being to kneel to me. Were I a king I would not permit it! Rise, therefore, ere I speak another word."

To obey you I do it," she said, slowly raising herself up, and standing before him in all the wretchedness of her physical ugliness and her moral degradation. "There! you see I am obedient. Now——"

"Mrs. Ranger, I solemnly assure you that I appealed to the Syndics on your behalf," continued Jocelyn. "I represented that the Princess herself, deeply as you had injured her, craved not your life—that Baron Bergami, for whose heart the murderous blow was destined, sought not your death."

"And what was the result?" asked the wretched woman, with an agonized feverishness of impatience.

"There is no hope," returned Jocelyn solemnly. "The law will take its course."

Mrs. Ranger sank back once more upon the pallet. She seemed confounded: all hope was now evidently crushed within her. She said not a word; and it almost appeared as if the bitterness of death were at this instant passing away. Some portion of her natural strength of mind appeared to revive again; and half-suppressing a convulsive gasp, she said, "Now do I know the worst. I am astonished that even for a single moment I could have cherished the idea that mercy would be shown me."

Then there was a pause of several minutes, during which the unhappy woman appeared to be looking inwardly, communing with herself.

Jocelyn was most anxious to get away: the scene had altogether been painful beyond description; and though he did not choose to consult his watch, because it would be far too cruelly significant a hint for *her* how time was passing, yet he could tolerably well conjecture that nearly two hours must have elapsed from the moment he entered that cell. But he still experienced enough compassion for the miserable woman, and at all events possessed feelings of too delicate and considerate a nature, to hasten away at a moment when such a proceeding would disturb the solemn meditation in which she was engaged.

"Yes—I have now abandoned all hope," said Mrs. Ranger, again breaking silence. "But tell me—for those who come near me in this dreadful dungeon will give me no information relative to aught that is passing without,—tell me, I say, how fares it with those unhappy girls, Agatha and Julia? God knows I did not mean to cause their sister's death. Alas, poor Emma!"

"Sad and sorrowful is the lesson which the fate of those three young women teaches," answered Loftus. "One, as you know, already lies in a premature grave—and the other two——"

"Speak—what of them?" demanded Mrs. Ranger, seeing that he hesitated. "Tell me everything. Methinks I shall die more easily if I know the worst in every respect; because my feelings must be relieved from all suspense. Speak then."

"Yes—for the reason you have set forth I will answer your question," rejoined Loftus. "Know then, that Agatha and Julia are the inmates of a mad-house: their senses have abandoned them for ever!"

"O God! this is horrible——and yet it is better than death! Mr. Loftus, I am calm now: my soul is nerved to meet my doom. Farewell!"

"Farewell—and may heaven have mercy upon you!"

In a few moments the door opened to give Jocelyn Loftus egress from the cell of the doomed woman.

The turnkey and the Protestant minister were walking together in the passage; and as our hero issued forth from the dungeon, the reverend pastor went in to give the last consolations of religion to Mrs. Ranger.

As our hero crossed the threshold of the prison-gate again and stepped into the street, the church clocks proclaimed the hour of midnight: but the moment the iron tongues of the huge bells in the towers had ceased to beat the air with their deep metallic notes, a smaller bell with sombre tone took up the sound. This was rung by a watchman passing up the street in which the prison was situated: and when he had made his bell clang forth half-a-dozen consecutive strokes, he said in a loud but lugubrious voice, "Past midnight! Good people all, pray for the souls of those who are to die in a few hours!"

Jocelyn shuddered: and quickening his pace, he returned to the *Hotel Royal*, where he had taken up his quarters since the terrible tragedy at Maravelli's.

CHAPTER CLXXXII.

THE GUILLOTINE.

It was eleven o'clock in the forenoon; and brightly shone the sun in a heaven of unclouded azure. Lake Leman never seemed more beautiful, nor the Alpine scenery in the distance more sublimely grand. It was a day fitted only for universal rejoicing, and to serve as a holiday to commemorate some happy event. But though the streets of Geneva were crowded to excess, and multitudes were pouring in from all the surrounding districts, yet was it no festive occasion. For there—in the principal square of the republican city—stood a sinister object; and the golden beams of the cloudless sun were reflected in the hideous axe of the guillotine!

Yes—an immense crowd was collected: and the windows, balconies, and roofs of all the dwellings looking upon the spot were put into requisition by the anxious spectators. Pity was it that so many, many young damsels, wearing the picturesque attire of the rural districts or the mountain heights in the neighbourhood, should have donned their Sunday raiment for such an occasion: but so it was! The pretty caps, white as the snow upon the Alpine summits in the distance, and resting upon hair arranged in heavy masses or else in beauteous braids, —those boddices laced with coloured ribbons, and imprisoning busts modelled in the most voluptuous style of woman's symmetry—those gracefully flowing petticoats, leaving so much of the well-shaped legs displayed,—all assuredly set off the charms of the Genevese damsels to their utmost advantage: but, Ah! were these damsels gathered in that market-place now for the mere purpose of being seen and admired? No: on this occasion they scarcely thought of themselves. They had put on their Sunday raiment because it was their habit to do so when stealing a day from their usual avocations, and when congregating in great numbers. But all their thoughts—all their ideas—all their interest, in short, seemed absorbed in the legal tragedy that was about to take place.

There were not many troops present: the people of Geneva, having republican institutions, and governing themselves, are in the habit of preserving order without the coercion and repression of large military and constabulary forces. Still there were a few soldiers and mounted gendarmes, for the purpose of keeping the space about the scaffold clear, and maintaining a pathway amidst the dense mass for the passage of the vehicle that was expected.

The behaviour of the multitude was most decorous, forming a strange contrast with that of the crowds which assemble at the Old Bailey in London to witness the execution of a criminal. There—at Geneva—no ribald jests were heard, no practical jokes were played: there was no loud coarse laughing—no disgraceful quarrelling—none of those indecencies and obscenities which are enacted on an execution-morning around the drop in front of Newgate. True, the same morbid feeling of curiosity which serves to gather the crowd in the Old Bailey, had now congregated these masses in the market-place at Geneva: but there the similitude ceased. For around the Genevese guillotine the bearing of the populace was as solemn and as respectful as if those gathered masses had come to assist at a funeral. Upon every countenance might be seen an expression of mingled awe, and terror, and grief: and any remarks that were made were uttered in subdued whispers, as if those who spoke felt that they were in the presence of the dead!

But let us turn our attention to the front of the prison, which establishment was situated at some little distance from the great square. At the door of that gloomy gaol stood a rude uncouth-looking vehicle, like a common cart, drawn by two horses. Inside four coffins were placed. An escort of gendarmes was in attendance. A little after eleven the prison-door was thrown open; and the three male criminals—Kobolt, Hernani, and Walden—came forth, accompanied by the Catholic priest who had all along been appointed to minister unto them. They were evidently much cast down, although to the best of their power they strove to maintain a bold front. Kobolt was the least depressed of the three; but he was a man of more dogged resolution and decided character than his comrades. On ascending the cart they all three gave signs of a cold horror stealing upon them, as they beheld their coffins; and for a moment the expression which swept over Hernani's and Walden's features was full of anguish. Kobolt hastened to seat himself on the edge of the vehicle in such a way that the priest might stand between him and the piled-up coffins.

No manifestation of feeling broke forth from the crowd assembled in front of the prison: there were neither hootings nor yellings,—but on the other hand there were no expressions of compassion. The desperate characters of the three criminals had so fully transpired on the occasion of their trial, that their fate was not likely to enlist much sympathy in their favour.

Again the prison-door opens,—and now all eyes are turned upon the wretched object who comes forth. It is Mrs. Ranger. Hideous as she already was when Lofus saw her a few hours back, yet more awful still was the change which had since taken place in her appearance. No conception of the most horrible witch that ever brewed her hell-

broth in hollow rock or gloomy cavern, could outvie the revolting aspect of the doomed woman. It was evident she was exerting all her courage for this awful occasion—evident also that she had worked herself thus up to a pitch of energy which would give way with the least untoward incident. On issuing forth from the gaol, she swept her eyes around with a quick glance of apprehension, as if fearful of receiving ill treatment from the multitude: and then the very next moment she seemed appalled by the silence so deep, so ominous, which prevailed. Not a murmur was heard, not a syllable was breathed, even in the lowest whisper, as the turnkeys helped her up into the cart. She threw a shuddering look upon the coffins; and it was only with an almost preterhuman effort that she prevented herself from giving vent to her anguish by one loud, long, and terrific shriek.

The cart moved on. The three men were, as already stated, attended by the Catholic priest; and Mrs. Ranger had the Protestant minister with her. In order that the voices of the two holy men might not jar with each other and create confusion for the ears of the doomed ones, they each spoke in low tones—perhaps all the more impressive and solemn on that account. Mrs. Ranger listened at first with deep attention; and her lips from time to time moved as if in her heart she was echoing the clergyman's prayer. Kobolt maintained a sullen reserve: but Hernani and Walden rapidly grew more attentive to the priest as the vehicle proceeded towards its terrible destination.

The wretched woman had purposely avoided meeting the eyes of the three men who were about to suffer for having consummated a crime which her gold had bribed them to commit. They had however gazed with some degree of wonder upon her when she first came forth from the prison-door: for they were at a loss to believe that it was possible for a human being to become so changed in a few weeks. She seemed to them at least twenty years older than at the time when the terrible deed for which they were all about to suffer was perpetrated.

The cart moved onward, attended by the escort, and surrounded by the multitude which kept pace with it. Solemn was the silence which prevailed, so far as human voices were concerned—those of the two priests being alone audible to the ears of the condemned criminals. But the sweep of the multitude, the trampling of so many feet, the heavy sounds of the cart's massive wheels, and the hoofs of the horses that drew it as well as of the mounted escort, combined to form a din as of a flowing torrent. The procession had to pass through the street in which the *Hotel Royal* was situated; and though Mrs. Ranger had kept her eyes bent down from the moment she first entered the cart till now, yet she seemed to have an intuitive idea when the vehicle arrived opposite that establishment. Then she raised her looks, and swept them rapidly over the numerous windows fronting the street. They were all occupied with spectators; and therefore in so hurried a glance it would have been impossible for her to discern whether Jocelyn Loftus was of the number at any one window: but from all she knew of the young man she felt persuaded that he was not. And she was right. Not for worlds would our hero have gazed upon that spectacle of human misery!

On went the procession—and in a few minutes Mrs. Ranger knew that it was on the point of turning from the street into the great square, and that on gaining the angle of the line of buildings on the right hand, her eyes would obtain a view of something sinister—indeed, the guillotine! Now she no longer heard what the clergyman said: his voice was as a mere droning in her ears. The blood appeared to be rushing up to her brain with a violence as if to make it burst. Sparks seemed to scintillate before her eyes—her arms and limbs tingled to the extremities of the fingers and toes, as if being singed all over. She kept her looks fixed on the angle of the street—that angle to which every instant brought her nearer, and round which the first glance would show her the guillotine! It was a horrible fascination; she could not help it: something appeared to compel her to fix her eyes on that point—while something on the other hand appeared to try might and main to bend her looks in another direction. But the former power was the greater: yet between the two she was tortured horribly—the conflict being as it were, in every vein, artery, nerve, fibre, muscle, and sinew of her frame. At length the angle is reached—the cart turns somewhat—and behold! the two tall black spars of the guillotine, with the triangular axe shining ghastly in the sunlight, strike upon her view, the whole apparatus upreared above that ocean of human heads!

"My God, my God!" she murmurs audibly—and at the same time Walden and Hernani, stricken by a mortal terror, sink down upon their knees at the feet of the Catholic priest.

Kobolt remains sitting on the edge of the vehicle: but his countenance is now hideous in its pallor, and its workings are awful to contemplate. He is now beginning to look death more closely in the face: he is walking up to it: in a few minutes more they will meet—they will touch!

But Mrs. Ranger—how feels she *now?* O heavens! what would she give to recall the past? What would she give to be enabled to live over again the last few months of her existence? Are her thoughts now reflected back to those times when she was the innocent child, with the cherub cheeks and the flowing hair, disporting in the garden of fruits and flowers?—does she think of the period, when as the cherished mistress of her noble seducer and in the glory of her beauty, she reclined upon the sofa, giving orders to her lacqueys, and inspecting the rich merchandize which all the finest warehouses of London sent for her approval? Yes—Oh yes—she remembers all this—the bright days of her childhood, the luxuries and the splendours which were the reward of her fall from virtue! Ah! and she remembers likewise that lone churchyard in which there is a humble grave, unadorned with marble monument and marked by no stone; but where the grass grows over the heaped-up clay, and above which in winter-time the cold winds moan, and sigh, and roar, and rave, in the alternating voices of sorrow and of fury. Yes—nor less does she review every detail and feature of her own vile career. For the faculty of thought is not laggard now: such a vivid keenness is imparted to her mental perceptions, that in a few moments her memory can run its eye over the incidents of years; and in an incredibly short space of time—the space of two or three minutes—can she embrace every incident, from the earliest scene in the cottage garden of a distant county, down to

this present chapter of her life which is about to close with the guillotine that stands *there*, in the market-place of Geneva!

Still amidst a profound silence so far as the voices of the crowd are concerned, does the cart move on. Oh! is there naught to be done whereby she can be saved? does man know not of any atonement which she can make? has the law left no loop-hole through which she can creep? will not justice relent at the last moment? This Protestant minister, who is a Genevese, and much respected in the city—could he do nothing for her? She is about to ask him, when a voice whispers in her soul that she has already done so a hundred times over, and that the holy man has no more power to save her than the carter who is driving her to the scaffold, or any one of the gendarmes who are guarding her progress thither. She must die, then? O heavens, she must die! What? when the sun is shining in such gorgeous splendour, and the heavens are cloudless, and all nature seems smiling and glad? Is it possible she can be doomed to die on such a day as this? No, no: it were an outrage offered to heaven to shed human blood on such a day! They must bear her back to prison and wait till the weather changes, and becomes congenial for the taking of human life—when the sky shall be overcast with black clouds and the sun be veiled, and the buildings shall gleam not in his glorious light—and when too the axe of the guillotine shall seem a dull mass like lead, and not bright and shining as silver!

Such was the train of frenzied thoughts which swept through the wretched woman's mind, as the cart moved onward to the scaffold erected in the middle of the great square. Nearer and nearer it approaches: more terrible grows the apparatus of death. Oh! is it all a hideous dream—or a reality too fearful to contemplate? so fearful indeed, that it is only by questioning its possibility until the very last, that the mind is saved from reeling beneath the shock and going mad!

The cart stops within a few feet of the steps at the back part of the scaffold. The platform is about ten feet high—lofty enough therefore for the entire mass of the populace around to behold the full enactment of the appalling tragedy. In the front part the two black spars tower aloft with an interval of about three feet between them: the axe is suspended close up to the cross-beam; and the string which retains it there or lets it fall at pleasure, has the end fastened to a peg conveniently placed for the hand of the executioner to reach. A plank, about four feet long, and with one end fastened by a hinge to the platform, is so placed as to serve for binding the victim to it. Two pieces of wood resembling the stocks in which vagrants used to be set in England, but with only one hole—and this intended for the head of the criminal—are fitted between the lower part of the two spars. The uppermost piece of wood, being moveable, works in grooves cut into the spars a short way up; but another groove runs up each spar to the very top; and in these does the axe of the guillotine work. Immediately in front of the place where the criminal's head is thrust in what may be termed the stocks, an immense basket filled with sawdust is put to catch the head and the blood when the gleaming hatchet descends and does its awful work.

Such were the dread paraphernalia of death—such the arrangements of the guillotine. All these details were embraced in a single moment—aye, and comprehended too, with a horrible clearness, by Mrs. Ranger. She shut her eyes for the first moment following the fearful survey which she thus took: but she was compelled by a dread fascination to open them again and fix them on the object of this appalling interest. As for her three companions in crime and punishment, they were now completely stricken down by the presence of death's ghastly engine; and even Kobolt began to join his accomplices in the mournful lamentations which during the last minute or two they had been putting forth.

Two men now ascended the platform of the guillotine. These were the executioner and his assistant. Stationing themselves near the plank, they waited for the gendarmes to bring them up the first individual who was to suffer. This was Mrs. Ranger. The authorities had deemed that it would be more merciful to put her out of her misery as speedily as possible, rather than suffer her to be a spectatrix of the decapitation of her companions first. Hernani wished her good bye, and extended his hand. It was a good feeling which, at such a moment, prompted such a man thus to separate in peace from the woman who might almost be regarded as the authoress of his own calamity, inasmuch as it was she who had bribed him and his accomplices to commit the crime for which they were all about to suffer. But it was only with a mechanical movement that she took the outstretched hand: for her senses were now all paralyzed by the horror of consternation and dismay. Kobolt and Walden followed Hernani's example: their hands were also shaken for a moment, but in the same mechanical, unconscious manner;—and then Mrs. Ranger was conducted by two gendarmes up the steps of the guillotine, the Protestant minister bearing her company.

Words have no power to convey the state of mind which this miserable woman experienced now, as she stood upon the threshold of another world: but we can scarcely say *experienced*, because she had no power of comprehending the condition of her own feelings. She seemed to be walking in a dream—yet a dream so horrible, so full of consternation, so fraught with utter dismay, that it was accompanied with the most poignant of agonies. The executioner and his assistant took her by the arms and placed her against the plank, which they had raised to a vertical position; and they proceeded to fasten her to it. Now she became convulsed with quick gaspings; and the Protestant minister, who was nigh, breathed a prayer in her ears. But it was as if he stood upon the sea-shore preaching to the waves when roaring in the rage of the tempest: for a similar storm was in her brain—and she heard him not. Suddenly however she gave a convulsive start—swept her eyes wildly around—and in that quick lightning glance embraced the crowd, the tall spars in front of her, and all the principal features of the scene.

"Just heaven! it is no dream then? It is a reality!" she cried forth in a rending tone: and then, after a single moment's pause, there thrilled from her lips a shriek as wild, as penetrating, as fully fraught with an ineffable agony, as that which between thirty and forty years ago she had given

when standing by the side of her mother's corpse.

But this shriek which she sent forth now on the scaffold of the guillotine in the great square of Geneva, was one such as had never been heard before—a scream which those who did hear, have never since forgotten, and which has often rung again and again in imagination through their brains. Oh! it was a fearful, fearful thing to be present *there* and hear that death-note of a human being's wild and excruciating terror, going up from the platform of the ghastly engine of destruction into the air all golden with the effulgence of the glorious sun!—it was a dread and a shocking thing that such a wail should pierce the noon-tide air on such a day, while nature was smiling, and happy, and joyous all around!

But what had this to do with the march of what is called human justice and the execution of man's blood-thirsty law? Having given vent to that agonizing scream, the wretched woman fell into an immediate stupor; and though she was still alive, yet all consciousness had abandoned her. Being strapped to the plank, she was lowered upon it to a horizontal position, so that her head was received in the semi-circular indenture in the lower half of the stocks: the upper half was instantaneously let down, and her neck was now held shut in the hole, her head hanging out convenient for the stroke of the hatchet. And *that* was soon given! The executioner loosened the string from the peg—down fell the axe with a whirring noise—the blow was struck—the head was severed—and with a great gush of blood it fell into the basket beneath!

To unstrap the trunk, hurry it away to its coffin in the cart, and carry the severed head thither also, was the work of but a couple of minutes. Then one after another did the three "fishers of men" ascend the scaffold, and suffer death in the presence of the awe-stricken multitude.

CHAPTER CLXXXIII.

VALENTINE AND VENETIA.

RETURN we once more to Carlton House.

It was about mid-day; and Lady Sackville had just descended from her boudoir to the drawing-room of her suite of apartments, when a domestic entered to state that Sir Valentine Malvern requested an interview with her ladyship, and that he hoped it would be accorded him. Venetia at once desired that he might be admitted; and in a few minutes the young baronet was ushered into the drawing-room.

"I gave you a special invitation to call upon me," said Venetia, extending her hand with graceful affability towards him; "and yet you send in a message as if you thought that there was some difficulty in obtaining access to me."

"It is but mid-day," answered Sir Valentine—"full two hours earlier than the proper time for paying visits of ceremony or courtesy—but, as it appeared to me, the most suitable hour for making a call on a matter of business."

"A matter of business?" echoed Venetia, with a sweet smile: "I am at a loss to conceive how there can be any business between us. But in any case you are welcome. As for the propriety of the hour, you are quite right, Sir Valentine: this is just that disagreeable part of the day when there is little or nothing to do, and it is difficult to know how to amuse one-self."

"A little embroidery, or tambour-work, or drawing?" suggested Sir Valentine: but he spoke in a somewhat melancholy manner, and also with a partial embarrassment amounting to constraint.

"I dislike such occupations," answered Venetia. "I was always of indolent habits. I used once to be much addicted to novel-reading: but latterly I have given it up. I find that there are so very, very few books in which the world is depicted truly. It was all very well when I was accustomed to judge the world entirely by the books I read: *then* they had an extraordinary charm for me."

"And yet your ladyship has read other books besides novels?" said Valentine, gazing upon her with a sort of mournful interest.

"Yes—assuredly," she replied, again smiling with all her wonted sweetness. "Does not the world call me accomplished? Well, and without vanity I may say that so I am, considering how little it requires to render a lady accomplished in high life. For instance, I have read all our best poets; and possessing a memory of very great power—this too I may say without vanity, because memory is a gift—I can repeat the finest and most striking passages of these works. Then I can draw when I choose. Here," she continued, rising from the sofa on which she was seated, and approaching a table where she opened a splendid portfolio: "these are my specimens. See—here are drawings in chalk, and drawings in pencil; and here are designs in water-colours. Most of these I did when at Acacia Cottage, before I came to Carlton House: but since I have been here I have had no time for drawing—or rather perhaps, no inclination."

"They are very beautiful," said Valentine, who, had followed Lady Sackville to the table. "I should not think of flattering you for a moment," he continued: "but I myself am very fond of drawing; and I have no hesitation in pronouncing these specimens to exhibit a great proficiency. And yet they bear every indication of a taste rapidly cultivated and not gradually developed—a taste, so to speak, which put forth all its powers of a sudden, and grappled with difficult subjects before it passed entirely through the usual length of training."

"You are right, Sir Valentine," answered Venetia: "and now I see that you are really no flatterer but at the same time an excellent judge. Well then, for my other accomplishments—I am considered a tolerably good musician—quite good enough to compete with any lady who sits down to her piano or her harp either for her own recreation or that of her friends, at a select party. Then, as for my conversation, when you and I come to know more of each other you will be able to judge me on that score."

"And do you think," asked Sir Valentine, surveying her with a singular expression, "that we shall know more of each other? Do you wish it?"

"Did I not give you a pressing invitation to call?" asked Venetia: then resuming her seat on the sofa, while the young Baronet returned to the chair which he had taken near her, she said in a somewhat more serious tone, "But tell me, Sir Valentine, what

meant ere now by saying that your visit was of a business-character? Perhaps the answer will explain wherefore I behold a certain constraint in your manner."

"Do you consider my manner to be unfriendly?" he asked with some degree of hesitation.

"On the contrary," exclaimed Venetia: "I was rejoiced to find that almost from the first moment you entered the room, we began conversing in the most friendly manner together; so that I was actually induced to enter upon an account of all my accomplishments. But I hope you will believe me, Sir Valentine, when I assure you on my honour as a lady," added Venetia seriously, "that it was in the same unaffected artless manner as of a sister talking to a brother."

"Ah!" ejaculated Sir Valentine Malvern: and again did so singular an expression of mingled embarrassment and yet kind interest pass over his countenance, that Venetia saw there was something more in his mind than she could comprehend.

"I see," she said, "that you wish to speak to me upon some subject that you nevertheless hesitate to approach:"—then in a still lower tone she added, "Perhaps it is relative to the first time we ever met? You seek an explanation——"

"Do not for a moment fancy that I come hither swayed by any impertinent curiosity," interrupted Valentine.

"You have never mentioned——" began Venetia.

"Never!" rejoined Malvern, instantaneously comprehending what she meant. "I was in St. George's Church when you were married to Lord Sackville—then Mr. Sackville——"

"What! you were there?" exclaimed Venetia, in astonishment.

"Yes: it was however with no specific intention—it was purely accidental. But when I saw you I was struck with amazement. For some weeks or months previously I had heard of Miss Trelawney—every one had heard of Miss Trelawney—and I was astonished on being told in that church and on that occasion that *you* were Miss Trelawney! Then said I to myself, '*I am mistaken*:' and yet I could not altogether convince myself that I was so. I do not wish to flatter you—very far from that: but I was at a loss to believe at the time that there could be *another* young lady in the world resembling the Miss Venetia Trelawney whom I saw walk up the aisle of St. George's Church and proceed to the altar on that occasion."

"Well—and you were never led to make inquiries?" asked Lady Sackville.

"No, never," responded Malvern. "I have already told you that I have no impertinent curiosity; and besides, though temporarily interested in you, and the apparent mystery attending you at that time, I was too much engrossed with my poor father's disappearance to give the circumstance a prominent place in my memory. But the other night—when you interrupted my interview with the Prince—from the very signs you made me, did I perceive that the suspicion which I had entertained at St. George's Church, *was* after all the correct one, and that the young lady passing by the name of Venetia Trelawney was really the same whom I had once before met under such very different circumstances."

"And now you seek explanations?" said Venetia quickly.

"No—very far from it," responded Malvern. "I have already assured you that I have no impertinent curiosity. Besides which, under ordinary circumstances, your affairs would not regard me; and I trust that I know the position and the duties of a gentleman too well to pry into the secrets of any lady."

"Under ordinary circumstances you say?" ejaculated Venetia. "Are there then some *extraordinary* circumstances," she inquired, "relative to you and me?"

"Do you not think," asked Malvern, "that I am talking to you in a somewhat familiar strain, despite a certain embarrassment and awkwardness which I just now felt, but which is rapidly wearing off the nearer I approach the final revelation. But I ask, do you not think that I am conversing in a sort of familiar, free, and off-hand manner? as if there had subsisted between us the intimacy of several years—or as if we were cousins, or anything else of the kind you like. And yet this is but the *third* time I have ever spoken to you in my life: once in Hanover Square—you know when?—the other night in the presence of the Prince—and now."

"But I am not at all offended at your manner," said Venetia. "Perhaps I rather encouraged it by my own when you first entered the room."

"You know that I am engaged to be married to Florence Eaton?" said Malvern.

"I have heard so," replied Lady Sackville. "But why do you thus start from one topic to another?"

"Listen!" continued Malvern: "hear what I have to say. You have heard that I am going to marry Florence: have you likewise been told that I love her very, very dearly, and that not for worlds would I wrong her or prove unfaithful to her in word or deed?"

"I honour you for these assurances," replied Venetia. "Rumour declares the Hon. Miss Eaton to be a most beautiful as well as amiable and excellent young lady; and I sincerely hope your marriage will be a happy one. But why have you turned the conversation upon this point?"

"Loving Florence as I do," returned Malvern,—"and incapable of being faithless to her either in thought or deed, you might think it strange that I am sitting here addressing you in this familiar kind of style?"

"And yet there is a sort of melancholy in your manner," returned Venetia. "I know full well—yes, indeed, I am convinced—that all you have been saying has a grave meaning, and is the prelude to something yet unsaid. I have already told you that I am very far from being offended with this frankness of tone in which you address me: and solemnly do I assure you that though I know so little of you in reality, I feel as if we were long-standing acquaintances and old friends. It is this that makes me experience an interest in you, and wish you so much happiness with your betrothed. Did I not ere now say that I spoke to you of my accomplishments just as if it were friend speaking to friend?"

"No—you said *sister* talking to *brother*," interrupted Malvern. "You see that I am getting more and more familiar. I scarcely think that I have once called you '*my lady*' or '*your ladyship*' during the present interview: and if I continue

talking much longer, it is as likely as not I shall address you by your Christian name next."

"I must confess myself totally at a loss to understand the meaning which lies hid behind your words:"—and as Venetia spoke she fixed her eyes earnestly upon Malvern. "You are indeed incomprehensible. There is in your manner all the mournfulness arising from the recent funeral which has taken place——"

"Ah! then you heard that my father's remains had been found, and that they were interred the day before yesterday?"

"Yes: I saw a paragraph in the paper to that effect;—and it is because I know how deep must be the shade of melancholy which the sad ceremony has left upon your mind," added Venetia, "that I am all the more at a loss to comprehend your present conduct. For that you are incapable of jesting or jocularity under such circumstances——"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Malvern emphatically.

"Well then, there is some strange meaning hidden beneath your words, and likewise concealed by your manner," continued Venetia. "Again I say that it seems to me as if you were preparing me for some revelation."

"Yes—I am. Are you prepared?" inquired Malvern: and he took her hand.

"Prepared for what?" asked Venetia. "You alarm me——"

"It is as a brother speaking to a sister that I am now addressing you," resumed Malvern: "and methought it my duty to give you some little preparation. In a word, suppose that you and I were closely related?"

"But how is this possible?" exclaimed Venetia. "And yet I see by your manner that it is so! Moreover, you would not jest—you are incapable of jesting under such circumstances——"

"I am serious—solemnly serious," replied Malvern. "We *are* related! In short, we owe our being to the same father—and you are my half-sister."

Lady Sackville was amazed at this announcement, which to her was incomprehensible. But Sir Valentine proceeded to give her certain explanations which opened her eyes to the comprehension of many mysteries, and which fully confirmed the statement he had made. This is not however the place to lay these explanations before the reader: they will be given in due course—and in the interval a requisite amount of patience must be exercised.

"But tell me, Valentine—tell me candidly," said Lady Sackville, when their long conference was nearly brought to a termination, "do you not regret having found so near a relative in *me?* Oh! I feel that I am blushing as I look you in the face: for rumour with her thousand tongues cannot fail to have wafted to your ears the allegation that I am the mistress of the Prince?"

"I did not come hither to judge you," returned Valentia; "but to communicate an important secret. That communication has been made: and now it is for you to decide whether you wish to consider me as your brother, and whether I am to look upon you as a sister."

"Can you doubt that such is my wish?" asked Venetia in a tone of gentle reproach.

"But remember," rejoined Malvern, "that, legally speaking, we are not related——"

"No—for the stigma of illegitimacy rests upon me and my sister," replied Lady Sackville.

"Nevertheless," immediately observed Malvern, "so far as I am concerned, I cannot lose sight of the one solemn fact that the same father was the author of our being. Moreover, inasmuch as the late Sir Archibald Malvern deceived your mother——alas, that I should have thus to speak of a father!——and sent her broken-hearted to an early grave, there is no possible atonement which I, as his eldest son and living representative, am not prepared to make on his behalf to you and to your sister—the neglected, unacknowledged children of that betrayed and broken-hearted mother! Therefore is it that I offer you and your sister a brother's love—a brother's fondness—and if you need it and will accept it, a brother's counsel likewise! I would even add, taking a more worldly view of the subject, that of the large fortune which I have inherited, equal shares shall be placed at your disposal——"

"So much goodness—so much generosity, overpowers me," murmured Venetia, melting into tears: then suddenly wringing her hands as a troop of bitter memories swept through her brain, she cried, "Oh! wherefore did I not know all this a year ago? It would have saved me from having become what I am!"

"Then you are not happy, my dear sister?" asked Malvern, in a tone of the deepest interest.

"Valentine," returned Lady Sackville, "I should have been happier—far happier—had I remained virtuous. But it is now for *me* to give *you* certain explanations; and you will perceive that I am as much to be pitied as to be blamed. You know wherefore I came to London—and how bitterly, how cruelly I was disappointed? This disappointment was the main cause that helped to place me in circumstances to the tide of which I was compelled to yield: I was hurried away by them—— But listen, and I will give you the whole history in a continuous manner."

With these words Lady Sackville entered upon her explanations to the young Baronet; and he listened with the deepest interest. She told him everything that had occurred to her during the first few months of her sojourn in London—how she came to occupy Acacia Cottage—how she was led to marry Horace Sackville—and how they were elevated to the peerage and installed at Carlton House. She likewise told him various particulars relative to her sister—that sister of whom they had ere now been speaking, and whom she represented as being engaged to marry a young nobleman of the highest character and the most exalted principles. But she did *not* explain to her half-brother how she had voluntarily abandoned herself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon—how she had been tricked into an amour with the Earl of Curzon—how she had been coerced by Colonel Malpas—and how circumstances had induced her to sell her charms to the Marquis of Leveson. No—all these profligacies and depravities she carefully concealed: she would sooner have perished than confess them;—and as Valentine entertained not the faintest suspicion in those respects, there was no necessity to make such confessions. Therefore, with regard to the dark side of her character, he saw her only as the mistress

of the Prince; and he pitied her—he compassionated her—for by the tale which she had told him and which was perfectly true so far as it went, he saw that she had indeed been hurried on by the current of a destiny which few women of even far stronger mind would have been able to resist, even supposing that a large amount of virtuous principle served as an auxiliary.

"And now do you not loathe and despise me?" asked Venetia, when she had concluded the explanations which she thought fit to give.

"No—as a brother I sympathise with you—I pity you," answered Valentine. "Were I your parent and had a right to speak with authority, I should say that I forgave you."

"Oh! you are all kindness," exclaimed Venetia: and she embraced him affectionately. "For heaven's sake do not think that I am altogether depraved! No—nor is my husband. There have been moments when he and I have compared notes of our feelings, and have allowed all the sentiments and emotions of our better natures to assert their empire. He is not happy—nor am I. A year's experience of a Court life has not wedded us to it——"

"And you would leave it—you would abandon it?" exclaimed Malvern joyfully. "At all events, my dear sister, you will withdraw yourself from this position of moral degradation? It is not too late for your husband and yourself to insure your mutual happiness——But I see that this is not the moment to converse upon so serious a topic. Your mind is now under the influence of unusual feelings, excited by the revelation I have made to you; and you and I must have opportunities of serious and earnest discourse together. But your sister—*our* sister——"

"Ah, my sister!" echoed Venetia: and again she grew troubled.

"I would propose," continued Valentine, "that

you and I should go together, as soon as convenient to yourself, and communicate the secret of her birth to our sister. Besides, I long to embrace her. You have drawn so delightful a portrait of her character, that I am impatient to become acquainted with her. When then shall we go?"

"To-morrow," replied Venetia. "In the morning I will set off in my travelling-carriage, accompanied only by my maid, Jessica, who is my confidant, and knows pretty well all the circumstances of my life. Where will you join us?"

"At Blackheath," returned Malvern. "You will stop to change horses at the *Green Man* tavern, and I will be there in readiness to accompany you."

"Agreed," observed Venetia. "I shall start at nine o'clock to-morrow. At ten we shall meet at Blackheath."

They then separated: and when Sir Valentine was gone, Venetia fell into a profound reverie, during which she thought over all that had just taken place—and then she reflected upon the course which she should pursue for the future. But while she was still deliberating upon all the features of her position,—whether she *could* possibly extricate herself from its trammels, and if so, whether she *should*,—the door opened, and a domestic announced Sir Douglas Huntingdon.

CHAPTER CLXXXIV.

NATURE'S BETTER FEELINGS.

The Baronet, as the reader is well aware, was a particular favourite with Venetia. She certainly liked him; and she was just in that mood on the present occasion when his company would prove agreeable. She had too many unpleasant things on her mind to bear thinking of long; and she was therefore well pleased at a visit thus calculated to distract her thoughts from gloomy ponderings.

"My dear Venetia," began Sir Douglas, sweeping his eyes around to assure himself that they were alone: otherwise he would not have addressed her in such a familiar manner; "it is a perfect age since I saw you last. Several long weeks, I declare! But you are as radiant and as beautiful as ever——No, not quite so radiant: for methinks that the smile now upon your features looks as if it were chasing away a recent gloom:"—and he embraced her as he spoke.

"Now, that is only a kiss of friendship, mind," she exclaimed archly.

"And why not of love?" he inquired, placing himself by her side upon the sofa.

"Because I have been very seriously thinking that I shall turn over a new leaf," answered Lady Sackville.

"And that meditation has made you serious? But a new leaf in what?"

"In my conduct. Now you really must acknowledge, my dear Douglas, that I have been a very naughty, wicked creature——"

"What! for allowing me at one time to bask in the sunlight of your smiles?" exclaimed Huntingdon. "As for your intimacy with the Prince, the world does not make it a reproach to you; and where the world sees no harm, what is the use of your repining?"

"Do you not think that there can be more true happiness in a life of virtuous enjoyment and quiet contentment?" asked Venetia, half serious, half smiling.

"If you were less beautiful than you are," returned the Baronet, "one would be apt to think you had experienced some slight or neglect that made you look with a jaundiced eye upon the pleasures, the dissipations, and the gaieties of a Court life."

"And may not those pleasures themselves become insipid?" asked Venetia.

"Truly so," was Huntingdon's response: then after a little hesitation, he said, "I have a very great mind to make you a confession, Venetia."

"Do. I am so fond of being made a confidante."

"But I am afraid you will laugh at me."

"No," rejoined the lady: "for I can already anticipate what you desire to tell me."

"Do guess then," exclaimed the Baronet. "It will save me perhaps some embarrassment, if you will interpret my feelings for me."

"Well then, I will try," said Venetia. "You are in love."

"Yes—with you. *That* you have known all along."

"No—I do not mean that," continued Lady Sackville. "You are no more in love with me than I am with you. We like each other—we experienced a transitory passion for each other," she added with a slight blush: "but that is all. What I mean is, you are in love with that Ariadne Varian of whom you have before spoken to me."

"And suppose that I told you that I was?" observed Sir Douglas, "and that I had come frankly and candidly to consult you as a friend?"

"I should say that I felt gratified and pleased with your confidence," answered Venetia; "and that, experiencing a real interest in your welfare, I should give you the best possible advice."

"Well, I think that I must unbosom myself altogether to you," resumed Sir Douglas. "Besides, you once before, when speaking of Ariadne, counselled me to follow the bent of my own inclinations. The truth is, Venetia, I am tired of the life I have been leading; and, like you, I am anxious to turn over a new leaf. As a matter of course you are well aware that my habits have been somewhat of the most dissipated cast, and that I have indulged a little too freely in the juice of the grape. I know that I have partially injured my constitution: but thank God, as yet I have neither got a red nose nor bleared eyes; still I look pale——"

"You look better than I have seen you for a long time past," interrupted Venetia. "So far from being pale, there is a little colour upon your cheeks—an appearance of health which I never beheld there before."

"Ah! I am delighted to hear you say this," exclaimed the Baronet. "The truth is, I was fishing for your opinion on the point; and you have given it to me. Well, I do feel much better in health and also in spirits than I have done for some time. But I will tell you how it happened. A little time ago I began to feel so queer that I got alarmed. I always awoke in the morning with a nausea at the stomach; and my hand trembled so that I could not shave myself. Pardon such details: they are not perhaps over delicate—but you and I are friends. So I may

add that I was compelled to take a glass of brandy to put my stomach in order—and then a glass of curaçoa to steady my hand—and then a tumbler of hock and soda-water to quench the heat which the alcohol had excited. Unless I did all this, I could not begin the day; and as it was, I seldom eat any breakfast. Altogether, I was getting regularly out of sorts, and began to entertain serious alarms lest death was coming upon me apace."

"Do not talk in so shocking a manner," interrupted Venetia. "Death! I have never thought of it yet," she added with a slightly perceptible shudder.

"Well, it is not a subject for a splendid drawing-room, with the sun shining in gloriously at the open casement, and with the zephyr wafting around us the perfume of all the delicious flowers on the terrace outside. But shall I go on with my own story?"

"Yes—assuredly. Do not make it too gloomy," said Venetia, now smiling again.

"I will not. To be brief," continued Sir Douglas, "I resolved upon consulting my worthy and excellent friend, Dr. Copperas; and to him I went. He listened to me with true professional knowingness; when I had explained all I felt, he shook his head gravely. '*We live too fast, my dear Sir Douglas,*' he said: '*we pay too much homage to Bacchus, and not enough to Æsculapius; we have no business to take brandy, curaçoa, and hock with soda-water of a morning—much less ought we to go to bed in a state of obfuscation four nights out of the seven. We are knocking nails in our coffin: we are killing ourselves rapidly. We must turn over a new leaf.*'—All this was very sage and very sapient, no doubt; and I could not help agreeing with the great physician. In fact, I had come to the very same conclusions myself before I visited him. He went on with a long tirade, which I do not however mean to inflict upon you, my dear Venetia: but all that he said amounted to this—that I had certainly done myself a great deal of harm by dissipation; but that I possessed a constitution naturally strong; and that the evil was not beyond reparation; that I ought to go to the sea-side and bathe; give up drinking almost entirely; live upon mutton, roast or boiled; and go to bed early; and that if I would do all this, I should soon see the beneficial results. He however added that he thought it just as well I should have another opinion on the subject, as he did not like me to act solely on his responsibility. I accordingly asked whom he would recommend me to consult: whereupon he declared that it did not much matter; any eminent physician would do; but if there were one who, amongst all, had devoted himself to the effects of hard living upon the human constitution, that man was the far-famed and the very celebrated Dr. Thurston."

"And what did you do then?" asked Venetia.

"Oh! of course I went to Dr. Thurston," continued the Baronet, in his half-serious half-jocular manner. "The same scene was enacted all over again, with very trifling alterations. For Dr. Thurston declared that it was by no means necessary to have come to him since I had received the advice of such an able, eminent, and highly-talented physician as Dr. Copperas, but that since his (Dr. Thurston's) opinion was asked, he could only say that he fully coincided with every tittle of the suggestions offered by Dr. Copperas—with the trifling difference perhaps, that in addition to mutton boiled and roasted, I might sometimes take it broiled in the shape of chops. Accordingly, I went away highly gratified that these two learned men so nearly coincided with each other; and of course I thought it a libel upon the profession to talk about doctors differing."

"And you followed the advice?" said Venetia.

"Pretty closely," returned the Baronet. "I went down to the sea-side—made a vow to leave off drinking a single thing in the shape of alcohol till dinner-time—and then only six glasses of wine. I missed my usual quantum terribly at first, but soon grew accustomed to the regimen. I took sea-baths and plenty of exercise, and went to bed at ten o'clock regularly. But as for the mutton, roast, broiled, and boiled, I must confess that I varied those dainties with a piece of beef, a chicken, and a little fish: for if there be one thing that I hate more than another it is sheep in any shape—roast, boiled, or broiled. However, I feel my health and my spirits so wonderfully improved, that nothing could induce me to exceed my six glasses of wine after dinner; and as for tempting me to drink anything *before* dinner—why, I can assure you, my dear Venetia, that if there were wine now moistening your dewy lips, I would not kiss them. But as there is not, I will:"—and he suited the action to the word.

"You are faithless to Ariadne Varian," said Venetia, laughing. "Besides, I can assure you on my honour that I am seriously determined to reform myself: and all that you have just told me proves how easily it can be done if a proper effort be only made. To speak without a jest, I tell you candidly, my dear Douglas, that entertaining a very sincere friendship for you, I am delighted at everything you have told me. And now I wish to hear the conclusion of your confessions."

"What more have I to confess?" asked the Baronet, smiling.

"Why, your feelings relative to Ariadne. Oh! I can read the human heart more easily, perhaps, than you think. Shall I tell you something about yourself?"

"Yes—pray do," exclaimed the Baronet. "Proceed. I enjoy the liveliness of this conversation amazingly."

"Then listen," resumed Venetia. "At the time all those strange things happened some months ago relative to Ariadne Varian, she made a deep impression upon your heart: but you did not choose at once to acknowledge that you had fallen headlong in love with the sister of a common clerk. When you had provided for her and her brother with the most noble generosity, you rarely went near the home you had given them: you tried to wean yourself from contemplating her image—you thought it was a phantasy that would pass: perhaps you even plunged more deeply into the vortex of dissipation to escape from it. But all would not do: you at length perceived that the sentiment with which she had inspired you, was stronger and more durable than you fancied. While at the sea-side you have had greater leisure for reflection; and this reflection has been pursued with a brain less clouded than heretofore. You have been dwelling upon the innocence, the beauty, and the amiability of Ariadne: you have perhaps even reproached yourself for neglecting her—

because you have seen how worthy she was of your attention. At last you have come to the conclusion that she is necessary to your happiness; and now the only struggle which remains, is to conquer the false pride that still lurks in a dark corner of your soul. But, on the other hand, you *do* feel all the pride of a man who, having reformed his own conduct, has rendered himself worthy of approaching an innocent and stainless damsel with the overtures of affection. Ah! believe me, my dear friend, this latter is a very honourable pride and does you infinite credit. Shall it not subdue, then, that *other* sentiment of pride, so false and hollow, which makes you hesitate to hasten and offer your hand to Ariadne?"

Sir Douglas Huntingdon gazed in mingled astonishment and delight upon Venetia as she thus spoke. Never had she appeared so enchantingly beautiful in his eyes: for she was radiant with the satisfaction of knowing that she was giving the most friendly counsel and pleading on behalf of an excellent girl. But it was no longer with a sensuous feeling that the Baronet now surveyed her: it was with a purer and holier emotion than he perhaps had ever before experienced, or she had ever before inspired.

"Venetia, there is something noble in your character after all!" he exclaimed, unable to repress this utterance of his thoughts. "You are not the mere woman of the world—the mere Court beauty: but you possess *a heart!* I declare solemnly that there are in you the elements of great goodness: but you have been spoilt by the artificialities, the temptations, and the vain scenes in the midst of which you have been flung. I do really and truly love you now: but not as I have before told you that I loved you. No—now I admire and esteem you:"—and taking her hand, he did not touch it with his lips, but he pressed it in the fervid warmth of friendship.

"Have I interpreted all your feelings aright?" she asked, much moved by the present scene.

"Yes—in every detail," he responded. "I could not have fathomed my own heart so nicely, so delicately, and so accurately as you have probed it for me. But is it not strange that you and I should be conversing in such a manner? Who would believe that the gay and brilliant Lady Sackville, and the dissipated Douglas Huntingdom, could thus have settled their attention upon serious matters—aye, and with the most genuine sincerity into the bargain? But it is so."

"Assuredly—on my part," said Venetia. "But are you quite confident that, now you are returned to London, you will not yield to its temptations and relapse into the vortex of pleasure?"

"No—it is impossible!" exclaimed the Baronet. "I can assure you that although ere now I may have spoken jocularly and good-humouredly of my alarms relative to my own case and of my visits to the physicians, yet that I was too much frightened at the time ever to run such foolish risks again. A man must be mad to trifle with his own health; for after all, health is the greatest of blessings. I should loathe myself if I had not sufficient command over my inclinations, after the experiencies I have gleaned, to be able to conquer any desire for a recurrence to the delights of dissipation. Venetia, I can assure you in all solemn seriousness," he added, fixing his eyes with steady earnestness and frank sincerity upon her, "that I am an altered man. I regarded you as a friend—I liked you—and I could not help coming to tell you all this. Only, in the first instance I did not exactly know how to make the confession; and I was somewhat afraid of ridicule. But you have generously—and I may almost say unexpectedly—come to my help: you have given an interpretation to my feelings in the most liberal and enlightened sense—and I sincerely thank you. Shall we not always continue the very best of friends?"

"We will," answered Venetia, with evident sincerity. "And now tell me what is to be Ariadne's fate?"

"Immediately upon quitting you, I shall proceed to her abode," answered the Baronet, "and shall make her an offer of my hand."

"You are resolved to do this?"

"I am fully resolved. Even if my own heart had not suggested the determination, your pleadings relative to that amiable girl would have been sufficient."

"Now go then," said Venetia. "You are bent upon so excellent an errand that it is a sin to detain you here. Besides, without knowing Ariadne, I nevertheless entertain the belief—considering all that has taken place between you—that she must love you. A young girl, whose heart was previously disengaged, could not become with impunity the heroine of so many wildly romantic adventures as those in which she figured with you as the hero. For you remember that you told me everything relative to the incidents at the hut near Shooter's Hill, and also your rescuing her from your burning house——But go: I will not detain you!"

"Farewell for the present," said the Baronet, taking Venetia's hand, which he once more pressed cordially.

"Farewell: and may all happiness attend you!" she answered: and they separated, with merely this clasping of the hand, and with no more embracings.

The scene had a most beneficial influence upon Venetia's mind. Following so closely upon her interview with Sir Valentine Malvern, it was chastening and salutary. It touched many of those better feelings of her nature which had long slumbered in the depths of her soul, but were not altogether destroyed. She felt, too, that she had behaved well in the counsel which she had given Sir Douglas Huntingdon: and she was satisfied with herself.

Wishing to commune with her thoughts in perfect freedom from the chances of interruption, she descended from the drawing-room and passed into the garden belonging to the palace. She entered upon the terrace to which Sir Douglas had alluded during his visit; and leaning over the slight iron railing which fenced it, she looked down upon a charming parterre of flowers beneath. With her eyes fixed upon them, she grew pensive: and yet no shade of mournfulness was upon her features. She thought how pleasant a thing it was to be beautiful and to afford pleasure by the existence of such beauty; and she went on to reflect how loathsome would be those flowers if their lovely petals were to distil poison instead of honey. Then she said to herself, "And I too am beautiful! But, oh! how happy should I be if my

loveliness had never proved the source of poison to my thoughts. Is it too late to reform? is it not possible for me yet to enjoy real happiness in this world?"

And then she meditated long and earnestly upon a subject so fraught with vital importance to herself. But a cold shudder crept over her when she remembered through what deep mire of pollutions she had been dragged—how she had passed through the arms of five persons in addition to her husband: and now indeed did a dark shade of sadness fall upon her lovely countenance, while the crystal tears rolled down her cheeks. Suddenly she felt a hand laid upon her shoulder: but so profoundly had she been absorbed in her reflections that she had heard the sound of no footstep advancing. Starting quickly, she turned and beheld her husband.

"What! in tears, Venetia?" he exclaimed: "and in the midst of a scene so bright and beautiful as this, and with the golden sunbeams playing around you!"

"Horace," she answered, "a singular change has come over me. But I can tell you nothing now. You must not question me. To-morrow I am going out of town to pass a day or two with my sister. On my return I will tell you everything: and perhaps—perhaps," she added falteringly, "you and I may have some very serious discourse together."

With these words she hurried away, leaving her husband transfixed to the spot and gazing after her in silent wonderment.

CHAPTER CLXXXV.

SCENES IN THE DANE JOHN.

The reader's attention must now be again directed to Canterbury. It was on the same day, and at the same hour—that is to say, at noon—when the preceding incidents took place, that the Hon. and Rev. Bernard Audley, Minor Canon of the Cathedral, was walking to and fro in the beautiful shady avenue of trees in the Dane John. He was in a deep reverie: but his thoughts were bent upon no topic fitting for a minister of the gospel. On the contrary, he was brooding over a passion that was devouring him. Against this passion had he struggled with great efforts: but it was stronger than himself. He had allowed his imagination to dwell upon it, until it had become his master. The object of his passion was Louisa Stanley!

About ten months had elapsed since he had committed that outrage, which was so fully described at the commencement of our narrative. The reader will remember how Bernard Audley had Louisa carried off by hireling wretches—gipsies, indeed, whose services he had engaged for the purpose; how she had contrived to escape from his house; how he had overtaken her in the crypt of the Cathedral: and how at the moment when she was about to succumb to his power, a tall female form dressed in black had sprung forward and rescued her from his clutches. It will likewise be remembered, how she was conveyed home in a carriage by Bernard Audley and this female, and how she was induced to pass the matter over in silence, in consequence of the letter full of entreaty which that same female had written to her. Nevertheless she had, as in duty bound, explained the circumstance to Jocelyn Loftus, who had called upon the Minor Canon on the following morning, and warned the unprincipled clergyman against a renewal of his persecution in respect to an amiable, innocent, and excellent young lady. From that time the Rev. Bernard Audley had left Louisa altogether unmolested: indeed, he himself had been for some while absent from Canterbury—doubtless pursuing his profligacies in secret elsewhere. But whithersoever he went—and no matter into what scenes he plunged—still was he followed by the image of the beautiful Louisa. He was continually picturing her to himself; and thus did the fury of his passion grow upon him.

It was indeed a fury. Nothing of love's softness was there in his heart, but the craving of fierce desire: no tender beaming light shining as a heavenly halo, but the lurid glow and devouring condescence of a volcano. Thus, when he dwelt upon her image, it was not to admire and to worship, but to gloat upon it with lustful ardour. And now, within the last few weeks he had returned to Canterbury, and on two or three occasions had he seen Louisa in company with Mary Owen, when the two young ladies walked out together. Mary herself was sweetly pretty, as we have already described: but the Minor Canon scarcely noticed her at all, so entirely was her beauty outshone by the transcending loveliness of Louisa. The reader cannot have forgotten how matchless indeed were the graces, and how inimitable the charms which combined to render Louisa Stanley the most heavenly of earthly beings. Not tall, but so exquisitely shaped, with a sylphid slenderness of figure, and a statuesque modelling of the bust, which was properly full without being voluptuously exuberant—she seemed taller than she really was; and while her step had all the elastic lightness of youth, her bearing was replete with maidenly elegance. The spirit of innocence and truthfulness seemed, as it were, to shine through her. Her dark brown hair, so rich and luxuriant, appeared the velvet drapery that flowed about the alabaster throne of her forehead, where candour and chastity made their chosen seat: artlessness and innocence were in the expression of her bright coral lips, and in the deep blue eyes, fringed with their long dark lashes. Altogether, she was a being to be loved with the purest and holiest affection; and assuredly it was no fault of hers, if in the bad heart of the Minor Canon her image had inspired so impure a flame.

But to resume the thread of our narrative. It was mid-day, and Bernard Audley was walking to and fro in the Dane John. His thoughts were fixed absorbedly upon the image of Louisa Stanley. He had seen her an hour previously entering a shop in Canterbury, and accompanied by the young lady whom on former occasions he had observed in her society, and whom indeed he had accidentally learnt to be a Miss Owen. This young lady was now in deep mourning, and her countenance wore a look of the profoundest melancholy. But few and transient were the thoughts which the Minor Canon bestowed upon her; whereas, on the other hand, deeper and more gloating than ever was the concentration of all his interest on the image of Louisa Stanley.

He had not ventured to accost her: he had even kept at a distance;—but the brief view which he had obtained of her graceful form, with the elegant feet and ankles tripping glancingly over the threshold of the shop which he saw her enter, had at once fired his imagination to a maddeniog degree. He had watched till she and her companion came forth again: at a distance and unperceived by them, had he followed as they retraced their way back to the cottage, which they never left for more than an hour or two at a time; and having kept them in sight until they had traversed the Dane John in their walk homeward, he had remained there, not daring to follow them any farther. But why dare he not? It was because the unhappy man felt himself irresistibly impelled to draw nearer and nearer to the two young ladies; and he knew that if he continued to yield to this impulse, he should be urged to overtake them altogether and address himself to Louisa despite the many reasons which warned him against such a course. For the moment, then, he had thus far resisted the temptation—thus far wrestled against the power that was impelling him on. But the effort was fearful; and the fury of the inward fire was fanned rather than mitigated.

"That girl unconsciously and innocently exercises an empire over me which will yet drive me to folly and to crime!"—it was thus he mused within himself; and his countenance was marked with the strong lines of a raging passion, so that handsome though it were, it looked dark, sinister, and repulsive to a degree at this moment. "Oh! to possess her—Oh! for one hour of her love—and I would give ten years of my life! I cannot live thus. It seems written in the book of destiny that I am to ruin myself, body and soul—here and hereafter—for that girl! Well, and she is worth a crime. Ah! no—not to dare death—not to dare the scaffold, for a few brief minutes of frenzied enjoyment. But if it were possible to clasp her, naked and glowing, in these arms, and to know that for hours—throughout a whole night—it were mine to revel in her beauties—*that* were a paradise worth any risk! Fool that I am thus to allow my passions to obtain such mastery over me. What? shall I peril everything—station, fortune, even my very life, for this girl? No, no: it were a madness—utter, utter folly!"

And, as if to escape from his thoughts, he quickened his pace and hurried along the avenue: but still the image of Louisa was uppermost in his mind, and his heated imagination pictured to itself all that she must be when denuded of her vesture. Thus did he in fancy gloat over her charms; and plunging deeper and deeper down into the fevered dream, he felt as if he were revelling in those beauties which he thus delineated to his conception.

"Oh! I shall go mad—I shall go mad!" he exclaimed aloud, suddenly stopping short. "Yes—unless indeed, I can either tear the image of Louisa Stanley forth from my soul, or else procure the gratification of my desires!"

At this moment he was startled by a sudden rustling amongst the evergreens close by; but looking hastily round, he saw no one. Indeed, at that particular time, there did not appear to be any person in the avenue, save himself.

"It was nothing," he said, still speaking aloud, but being unconscious, as it were, that he thus gave audible vent to his musings: then, as he slowly walked onward, he exclaimed in the excitement of a desperate resolve, "By heaven! I will possess her, happen what may!"

With these words he suddenly turned back; and retracing his way along the avenue, proceeded at a quick rate in the direction of the cottage where Louisa Stanley dwelt with her bed-ridden aunt and Mary Owen. Not that he had any settled purpose in view: but he was impelled by the mastery of his passions, to hasten towards the cottage, and watch from some convenient hiding-place to see whether Louisa Stanley should issue forth again this day, in which case he had made up his mind to address her. But what did he propose to say? what did he purpose to do? Was the bold bad man so maddened, so blinded, or so besotted with the fury of his unfortunate passion as to believe that either by entreaty or by threat, he could impart any of its fire to the chaste and stainless bosom of the charming Louisa? No—he did not think this: and again we say, that he had no settled purpose in view: but he was impelled towards Louisa's abode by that strong tide of passion to which he had now abandoned himself, and which was almost as strong as destiny itself.

Scarcely had he quitted the Dane John, when from behind that thick group of evergreens where he had heard the rustling, and which were impenetrable to the eye, a tall female in black came forth. Her countenance was pale even to ghastliness: the traces of deep sorrows were upon her features; and yet the great beauty which had once marked that countenance was not altogether extinguished. The dark eyes still flashed with strange fires; and the pale quivering lips revealed teeth which were fine, and in good preservation. Her age was about forty, though she looked three or four years older: but her hair was unstreaked with silver and her form, though very thin, was perfectly erect. Her apparel, consisting of deep black, was of good but not of costly material: and altogether there was an air about her which showed that she had been well-bred, and at one time in her life accustomed to good society.

"That man whom I love, despite of all his cruelty towards me," she murmured to herself, as she emerged from the evergreens and looked in the direction where Bernard Audley had just disappeared through the iron gate at the farther extremity of the avenue: "and he calls me his evil genius! It is true that I seldom appear before him save when it is necessary to rescue him from some new crime, or prevent him from making new victims! Ah! although I have from time to time thus started up as it were in his presence and rushed betwixt himself and the object of his lust—yet does he little suspect how constantly and how unweariedly I follow him about. And now again do his passions madly impel him to rush upon destruction! But I must save him—yes, and save also that sweet creature, the broken-hearted Melissa's daughter, whom he would thus immolate to his frenzied desires!"

While she was thus musing, the lady became aware that some one was advancing from behind. She mechanically turned and beheld another lady, *also* dressed in deep black, and *also* with a profound shade of mournfulness upon her countenance. She was about forty-six years old, and

possessed the remains of a beauty that must have once been truly splendid. She was still a very fine woman—stout and portly—with a commanding air that was natural to her, and which was visible enough despite her mourning garments and the sorrow of her looks.

The lady in black whom we represented as having emerged from the evergreens, gave vent to a sudden ejaculation of astonishment on beholding this other lady who had just entered the avenue, and whom she evidently recognized. Then, as the attention of the latter was at once drawn by this ejaculation towards her who had uttered it, the recognition was instantaneously mutual.

"Anne!" exclaimed the one who had emerged from the evergreens.

"Lilian!" said the other, who was indeed Mrs. Owen of Richmond. "Is it you?"

"Yes—it is I, Anne—your unhappy sister—the victim of Bernard Audley!" responded Lilian Halkin—for such was the name of her whom in previous parts of the history we have denominated the lady in black.

Then the sisters took each other's hand in a melancholy and remorseful manner, as if this present meeting irresistibly carried their memories back to long past years, over which they retrospected with regret; and though there was something tender and pathetic in the way in which they held each other's hand and gazed upon each other's countenance, they did not embrace. There was no enthusiastic joy in the meeting—but a profound melancholy: and as they thus surveyed each other and mutually marked the changes which time had wrought in their appearance since last they met many years ago, it was easy to read in their looks how deeply at that instant went the conviction in unto their souls, that their lives had not been such as they ought to have been, and that it would prove but a mournful and regretful task to compare notes in that respect with each other.

"And you recognized me at once, Lilian?" said Mrs. Owen.

"Yes. But you—should you have recognized me had your attention not been drawn towards me by the cry that I uttered on meeting you here?"

"I should have known you, Lilian: but you are greatly altered," answered Mrs. Owen, still surveying her sister with a mournful interest.

"Ah! it is not so much the lapse of time," answered Lilian, shaking her head slowly and sorrowfully, "as blighted love and the consciousness of crime!"

"Crime?" ejaculated Mrs. Owen, with a shudder. "Then it was true? Heavens! do not say so, Lilian!"

"Yes—alas, too true!" responded the unhappy woman: then sweeping her eyes up and down the avenue to assure herself that there were no observers and no listeners, she said, "Too true indeed! The poor innocent—in a paroxysm of frenzy I killed it!"

"Oh! but it was not deliberately done?" Mrs. Owen hastened to observe, anxious to suggest an excuse for her sister's crime, even though it should be an imaginary palliation.

"Heavens, no! I was wild and mad at the moment!" cried Lilian: then in a slower and more solemn voice, she added, "But the crime is not the less rankling *here*:"—and she laid her hand upon her heart. "Though acquitted through a flaw in the indictment, how could I show my face to those again who knew me? No—not even to my own sisters dared I appear——"

"And yet, Lilian, we cast you not off," observed Mrs. Owen: "for neither I nor Melissa were prudes—and Lydia was too good, too virtuous, too noble-hearted not to have received you with open arms."

"I dare say you have long thought me dead?" said Lilian, in a melancholy tone, and after a pause.

"I feared so. What else could I think? But what of Lydia?—have you ever obtained any tidings of her? what has become of her?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"She lives—and to say that she *lives*," replied Lilian, "is to express the very outside——"

"What mean you?" demanded Mrs. Owen, with mingled impatience and astonishment.

"I mean," was the response, "that our sister Lydia is alive; but that she is utterly unconscious of everything which passes around her. Paralysis has for three years past stretched her helpless—deprived of speech and with the light of the mind's lamp extinguished within her."

"Heavens! what do I hear?" exclaimed Mrs. Owen. "But where does she dwell? who tends upon her? in what circumstances is she placed? What has become of Melissa's children?"

"One is with her," answered Lilian: "the other is, I believe, in London—but I know not where or for what purpose."

"But where dwells our afflicted sister? under what name?" inquired Mrs. Owen, painfully excited.

"Under the name of Stanley——"

"Stanley!" ejaculated Mrs. Owen, almost reeling with the amazement that now struck her. "What! in a cottage somewhere in the suburbs—this way?"—and she pointed in the proper direction.

"Ah! you know it then?" exclaimed Lilian, now equally struck with surprise.

"I am going thither at this moment," answered Mrs. Owen. "They offered me a guide at the hotel; but I preferred proceeding thither alone, in order that I might compose my thoughts—or rather prepare them for an interview of a very, very painful character."

"Ah! I begin to understand," cried Lilian. "I had heard that a Miss Owen was staying with Louisa Stanley: but it never once struck me that she was your daughter. And it is so?"

"Yes—it is so. But surely these young girls," added Mrs. Owen, in a musing tone, "cannot have discovered that they are, as it were, related—that they would be cousins, if their births were legitimate. No—it is impossible."

"And you are going then to the cottage?" said Lilian, still gazing in amazement upon her sister, but not heeding her last remarks.

"Do you know what has happened, Lilian?" asked Mrs. Owen, now bursting into tears: "are you aware of the dreadful things which have occurred on the Continent?"

"At Geneva?—yes. I read it all in the newspapers, and I knew full well that those were your daughters. I remembered the Christian names of

the two eldest—Agatha and Emma: but the third and this one that is now staying with Miss Stanley were born after you and I ceased to see each other. I never knew their Christian names. Alas?—poor Anne, you are now in mourning—as I have been during many, many long years: for when I had passed through the terrible ordeal of a trial for murder,"—and the unhappy lady shuddered visibly as she spoke—"I recorded a solemn vow that sable garments should clothe me until the day of my death. My heart was destined to be in mourning from the instant that the last cry of my dying child rang through my brain; and I resolved that in mourning weeds also should my body continue wrapped until laid in the cold tomb."

"But how have you lived? where have you been for so many, many years?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"Oh! I see, my dear Anne," exclaimed Lilian, "that we have much—very much, to say to each other; and you are doubtless anxious to behold your daughter——"

"Yes—if she will pardon me," murmured Mrs. Owen, again melting into tears. "For it was my wickedness which has led to this fearful catastrophe at Geneva: it was I who placed my poor daughters in that career which has led to such awful consequences! One murdered by the assassin's knife—the other two hopeless idiots in a madhouse——"

"Ah! but is it possible that you were the cause?" exclaimed Lilian, shrinking back aghast. "Is it of such horrors that you accuse yourself?"

"All too true!" rejoined Mrs. Owen, her voice convulsed with sobs.

"But in what career of wickedness were they placed?" asked Lilian. "The newspapers, as you must be aware, gave the most meagre outline of the particulars—little more indeed than a bare narrative of the catastrophe itself."

"Because such grave matters and important interests were concerned therein," answered Mrs. Owen, "that the journals dared not chronicle all that transpired. However, upon this point I will tell you more when we meet again——"

"But where shall we meet again? and when?" asked Lilian.

"Where do you live?" inquired Mrs. Owen. "I am for the moment staying at the *Fountain Hotel;* but I propose to take Mary with me, if she will return to that mother whose crimes have been so great——and proceed with her to the Continent ——to visit Geneva and see her poor sisters."

"My home is for the present," answered Lilian, "at a humble peasant's cottage a few miles hence."

"But have you never been to see your poor sister Lydia?" asked Mrs. Owen.

"Never," replied Lilian. "After the frightful thing which happened to me years ago, I vowed that I would never go near my sisters again—much less her who was pure, and virtuous, and good."

"But there are vows, my dear Lilian, which ought not to be kept," said Mrs. Owen; "and this is one. Had you been faithful to that oath, you would not have accosted me just now."

"Ah! but I was so taken by surprise—so amazed, at seeing you here!" said Lilian Halkin.

"But you will not persevere any longer in thus absenting yourself from the bedside of a sister who is so cruelly afflicted?" urged Mrs. Owen.

"Perhaps I should long ago have forgotten my vow and flown to that cottage," said Lilian; "but how could I proclaim myself to be the sister of her who passes by the name of Miss Stanley, without also being compelled to embrace the young and innocent Louisa as a niece? Then what questions would she put to me!—and what could I say? how account for never having been thither before? No: it is impossible!"

"And yet," returned Mrs. Owen, "I am about to visit that cottage; and after all that you have told me, I must announce myself as the poor bedridden Miss Stanley's sister, and consequently as Louisa's aunt. And yet perhaps," she exclaimed, as a sudden idea struck her—an idea from which she recoiled aghast; "my own daughter Mary may have whispered in the ears of her young friend Louisa such things concerning her mother as to prejudice that excellent girl against me!"

"Then, under all circumstances, pause and reflect," said Lilian earnestly, "as to the course you will adopt. Go and fetch your daughter away—but make no revelation to Louisa to-day. Appear before her only as Mrs. Owen, the mother of Mary. Then, when alone with your daughter, you can ascertain from her lips to what extent her revelations may have prejudiced the young and artless Louisa against you. For, Oh! let us not mar that sweet girl's happiness by announcing ourselves to her as relations whom she cannot love and for whom she must blush!"

"Lilian, you have spoken wisely," said Mrs. Owen; "and I will follow your advice. To-day I shall have a long and serious discourse with my daughter Mary. Will you come to me to-morrow at the Hotel? and we will confer farther how to act."

"Yes: I will visit you some time in the course of to-morrow," replied Lilian. "Till then adieu, my dear sister."

"Adieu," said Mrs. Owen: and ere they parted they kissed each other.

Mrs. Owen then continued her way towards the cottage, in pursuance of the directions which she had received in answer to the inquiries made at the Hotel.

CHAPTER CLXXXVI.

THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

Having experienced no difficulty in finding the cottage, Mrs. Owen opened the little garden gate, and was advancing up to the front door, when an ejaculation of surprise not unmixed with joy, thrilled through the open casement of the parlour—and in another instant Mary Owen came bounding forth and threw herself into her mother's arms. She was in deep mourning, as we have already stated; and therefore Mrs. Owen saw at once that she was no stranger to the catastrophe which had occurred at Geneva. But that Mary would have already learnt the particulars of that dire tragedy, she had foreseen from her knowledge of the fact that Jocelyn Loftus, who was Louisa's lover, and of course in correspondence with her, was at Geneva at the time it occurred.

"My dearest Mary," murmured Mrs. Owen, in a voice well nigh suffocated with emotions: "can you—will you forgive your unhappy mother?"

"O heavens! do you ask me such a question!" cried Mary, as the tears rained down her cheeks. "Are we not already sufficiently unhappy?"

"Let us step aside somewhere, that we may talk together," said Mrs. Owen, hastily: "for I have much to say to you ere I see that kind young lady who has given you an asylum."

"Come this way, my dear mother," said Mary: and taking her parent's hand, she led her along the gravel-walk to an arbour in the remotest corner of the garden; then as they placed themselves upon the bench that was embowered with foliage, she said, "Here may we converse without restraint."

"Embrace me once more, my dear little Mary," said Mrs. Owen: then as she strained her youngest daughter to her bosom, she cried with much fervour, "Thank God, for having preserved you to comfort me!"

For some minutes neither mother nor daughter could give utterance to another word, so profound was their grief—so convulsive were the sobs that rent their bosoms—so deluging were the tears that they shed. Again and again did Mrs. Owen clasp Mary in her arms: for the worldly-minded woman was fearfully chastened by the awful catastrophe in which her intrigues and machinations had plunged her other three children.

"And you tell me, Mary, that you can forgive me?" she said at length. "Ah! it is a sad thing for a mother to be compelled to ask pardon of her daughter! But I know and I feel deeply, deeply, that I have been very wicked—that my conduct has been horrible——"

"Oh! my dear mother, speak not thus!" interrupted Mary, lavishing the most tender caresses upon her wretched parent. "And yet in one sense

I am overjoyed to hear you use such language! Forgetting the sad past so far as you yourself are concerned, I now feel that I have again a mother whom I can love and cherish!"

"Mary, you possess the kindest of hearts," murmured Mrs. Owen, profoundly affected: and all this woman-of-the-world's emotions were now as genuine and as sincere as for so many years of her life her hypocrisiea had been well sustained. "But whenever you look upon me, shall you not shudder as you think that it was I who sent your sisters forth upon that fatal mission which has consigned one to an early grave and plunged the other two into mad-cells?"

"O heaven! I cannot bear to think of it," cried Mary, with a strong shudder convulsing her entire frame. "But, ah! I charge not all this, my dearest mother, against you! Full well do I know that little indeed could you foresee so frightful a catastrophe!"

"O God, no!" rejoined Mrs. Owen. "But now I ask you, Mary, will you be content to leave this peaceful asylum which was so generously granted you when compelled to fly from your own mother's care—will you return to this poor mother, now that she is bereaved—stricken down with the strong hand of affliction——"

"Oh! it is my duty to return to you," cried the young maiden in a fervid tone.

"No—not even your duty, Mary," replied her mother: "for by my conduct have I severed every bond which ought to have linked us together. And to prove to you that I am not selfish now,—but that in order to make all possible atonement for the past, I will consent to any sacrifice for the present or the future,—I leave you entirely your own mistress—I exact nothing from you—I give you free permission to remain here under that hospitable roof where you have found a home——"

"Oh! talk not thus, my dearest mother," exclaimed Mary. "It is not only my duty, but also my inclination to return to you—and to go with you wheresoever you may choose."

"Decide not too hastily," said Mrs. Owen. "I know—and deeply feel—how great my wickedness has been; and not the least portion of its punishment is the present humiliation, which as a mother, I endure before you, my daughter. Indeed, it will be a long, long time, ere I can look you in the face without shame—and *never* without remorse! For I shall think of how I would have sacrificed you to the same vile selfishness which has led to the awful catastrophe that has plunged us both into tears and mourning."

If Mary Owen did not interrupt her mother in the midst of this last speech, it was because she was too deeply convulsed with grief to be able to give utterance to a single word. But again did she throw herself into her parent's arms; and in broken sentences did she say, "Do not speak to me thus—I cannot bear it! Ah! my dear mother, for whatever you have done you are terribly punished; and it is now for me to do all I can to soothe and console! It will be a long, long day, dear mother—yes, a long, long day—ere you and I shall know happiness again. But still—still—we may have the satisfaction—the mournful satisfaction of mingling our tears together!"

"Dearest Mary, you have already comforted me much," said Mrs. Owen, clasping the amiable girl passionately to her heart. "I scarcely hoped for such demonstrations of love, and tenderness, and filial devotion as these! It is far more than I deserve. But rest assured, dear Mary, that so long as I may be spared to you in this world, will I prove as good a parent as I have hitherto been a bad one."

"What more can you say, my dear mother? or what more can I ask?" murmured Mary.

"But now tell me, my dearest chi d," resumed Mrs. Owen, after a long pause,—"tell me to what extent that excellent young lady Miss Louisa Stanley has been prejudiced against me? I ought not to say *prejudiced*, because anything you may have told her I full well deserved——"

"Rest assured," interrupted Mary, "that I have spared my mother as much as possible in the communications I have made to Miss Louisa Stanley. Mr. Loftus knows more—far more—indeed *all;* but, for many reasons, as much as it was possible to suppress was kept veiled from the knowledge of Louisa. Ah! I understand, my dear mother," Mary exclaimed as a sudden idea struck her: "you are afraid that Louisa will not welcome you here as warmly as you would naturally wish? But she is the kindest-hearted, the most forgiving, and the most amiable being in existence; and if I only breathe a few words in her ear to say how sorry you are for all the past, and what tender things you have promised me for the future—— But stay, my dear mother! do not move—I will return to you in a minute."

Thus speaking, the young damsel hurried away and re-entered the cottage. In a few minutes she came forth again, accompanied by Louisa Stanley; and together did the two charming girls hasten to the spot where Mrs. Owen was seated. She rose however the moment Louisa was introduced by Mary into her presence; and then she saw at once, by the welcome which the amiable young lady gave her, that Mary's representations had indeed been as efficacious as she had predicted.

"Mrs. Owen, I need scarcely say how glad I am to find that my young friend Mary has at length regained a mother:"—and as Louisa thus spoke with tears in her eyes, she offered Mrs. Owen her hand.

"But to you, dearest young lady, what boundless gratitude is due!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen. "I have not words to express all I feel:"—and she raised to her lips the hand which she clasped in her own. "You gave an asylum to my daughter when compelled to fly from her natural protectress——"

"Oh! let us not talk of the past," cried Louisa, with amiable earnestness. "I know, madam, how deeply, deeply you have been afflicted——your garb proclaims that you are aware of the sad occurrence——and whatever words may flow from my lips, should rather be to console than to wound your heart! Again I say therefore, let us draw a veil over everything that has gone by, so far indeed as it is possible. And now tell me—are you really going to take my dear Mary away from me immediately?"

"My dear Louisa—for so you must permit me to call you," said Mrs. Owen, "your own good sense and kind feeling will enable you to understand that there is a duty which Mary and I have to perform. In two or three days we must leave England," added Mrs. Owen solemnly, "and repair to Geneva."

"Yes—I understand full well that you must proceed thither," observed Louisa. "When do you think of setting off?"

"In two or three days," repeated Mrs. Owen. "I will not be so unjust as to separate Mary from you altogether in a moment: for she loves you as dearly and as fondly as if you were her sister."

"And I love her equally in return," said Louisa: and the two amiable girls threw their arms round each other's waist and thus sat by Mrs. Owen's side upon the bench. "Will you not, my dear madam," continued our sweet heroine of the cottage, "remain here with me for the rest of this day?"

"Yes, Louisa—I cannot refuse your kind invitation," answered Mrs. Owen; "but I must take Mary away with me this evening—for, as you may suppose, we have many, many things to converse upon. To-morrow we shall come back again to visit you."

"Then you must remain here until the last moment to-night," said Louisa, in the warmth of generous hospitality towards Mrs. Owen and of affectionate friendship for Mary. "I shall not part with you till ten o'clock; and then the servant shall accompany you as far as your Hotel and take such necessaries as Mary may want for her immediate use. Is this an arrangement?"

"It is," answered Mrs. Owen. "As frankly and cordially as the kind invitation is given, do I accept it."

"And now," said Louisa, "let Mary and me introduce you into the cottage. It is humble enough: but the welcome I give you is all the more cordial on that account. Refreshments are now served up; and you must accompany us."

Thereupon the two young ladies led Mrs. Owen into the cottage.

Meanwhile the Rev. Bernard Audley, concealed behind the impenetrable verdure of the thick hedge which bordered the garden, had overheard every syllable of the preceding conversations. Not that he had cared much for what passed between Mrs. and Miss Owen: but the melody of Louisa's voice had sunk down like the most delicious music into the depths of his soul. Ah! if that divine harmony—for what harmony is more heavenly than the music of a lovely woman's fluid voice?—had touched some generous chord in his heart, or had awakened the better feelings of his nature,—happy should we be indeed to record the fact! But it was not so. Everything that was divine, and pure, and chaste, and angelic about Louisa Stanley—in her look, her conduct, her gestures, or her voice—and which would have disarmed every other libertine in the world, only added fuel to the fire that raged in the breast of Bernard Audley. For the first time the lion did not sink down crouching and subdued in the presence of a virgin in her purity and her innocence!

Yes—all that had passed was overheard by the Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral; and as with greedy ears he drank in the details of that arrangement which was made relative to Mrs. Owen's stay until the evening, he felt a galvanic glow thrill through his veins as Satan whispered in his ear that the opportunity he coveted would then be within his reach. Hurrying away from the vicinage of the garden, he repeated the details of that arrangement to himself.

"Mrs. Owen and her daughter will stay until ten o'clock: they will then take their departure, accompanied by the maid-servant. Louisa Stanley will remain alone in the cottage for at least an hour. Alone?—yes; for what is the old aunt—bed-ridden, dumb, and deprived of her senses?" and as he thus mused within himself he felt the devilish prompting again stir in the depths of his soul.

He sped away from the neighbourhood of the garden—not returning at once into Canterbury, but hurrying across the fields in order to be alone with his thoughts, so that he might with less restraint ponder upon the course he had resolved to adopt, and feast his imagination with the triumph which he hoped to achieve.

"And after all why should I not dare everything?" he mused aloud. "Again and again do I declare that she is worthy any peril and any danger that it may be needful to run. Besides, when vanquished and subdued in my embrace—when dispossessed of the flower of her virginity—will she make known her shame to the world? or will she cherish it as a secret not to be whispered even in the solitude of her own chamber, nor to be breathed even in a prayer to heaven? Yes—she will shrink from the bare idea of proclaiming her disgrace: she will not risk the loss of her lover, whom she adores so fondly. It will be the first lesson which the now innocent and artless one must take in the ways of hypocrisy—those ways in which all women become initiated sooner or later. Yes; and I will be her preceptor in the school of love's delights and duplicity's precautions."

The miscreant! he judged the rest of mankind by his own foul and polluted heart; and he formed his opinion of the female sex from those profligate creatures who, at various times, throughout his depraved career, had been the partners of his debauchery. His notions too were chiefly based upon his experiences in that aristocratic sphere to which he himself belonged, and amongst many of the female scions of which he had enjoyed great success: for his handsome person had been, as a matter of course, a great recommendation, and the sanctity of his profession as a minister of the gospel had rendered it *safe* as it were to intrigue with him. From all these circumstances his opinion of the female sex was not of the loftiest description; and the arguments which he used to confirm his resolve in attempting one last and (as he hoped) crowning outrage against Louisa Stanley, showed how little he was enabled to appreciate or understand the purity of that sweet maiden's soul. He did not forget that she had frankly communicated the former outrage to her lover Jocelyn: but then he thought to himself that she had adopted this course because of escaping pure and immaculate, and not having to blush in the presence of her admirer when making the revelation—much less having to fear that she would lose him altogether. Therefore Bernard Audley's argument was, that if her disgrace were utterly consummated, *then* she would not dare make any confession to her lover, but would hush it up and lock the secret carefully in her own bosom. Heavens! how little, we repeat, did he understand that excellent girl!

While thus giving free vent to the thoughts that were hurrying him on towards the crime that he meditated and the risk which he endeavoured to palliate, he reached the Dane John once more by a

circuitous route; and as he entered the avenue he was immediately confronted by Lilian Halkin, who rose from a seat half-embowered in the shade of the trees and the dense evergreens.

"Ah! is it you?" exclaimed Audley, an expression of mingled hatred and annoyance suddenly appearing upon his countenance: then as an idea flashed to his mind, and he recollected the rustling of the evergreens which had alarmed him in the midst of his soliloquy when in that same place a couple of hours previously, he said, "You have been watching me?"

"Yes—to save you from the perpetration of a crime that will plunge you into ruin," answered Lilian, in a voice that was firm and steady though profoundly mournful.

"What crime? to what do you allude? how dare you address me thus?" demanded the Minor Canon, putting these questions for the purpose of ascertaining to what extent he might have committed himself, when so unguardedly speaking aloud, to the knowledge of her whom he considered his evil genius.

"Scarcely two hours have elapsed since in this very avenue you gave utterance to the wild ravings of your passions,"—and as Lilian thus spoke, she fixed her eyes with a look of steadfast warning and reproach upon the Minor Canon. "Louisa Stanley has inspired you with a frenzied love—No, not *a love!*—that sacred name shall not be desecrated by being used in such a sense."

"You dare not say that I have conceived any evil design relative to Louisa Stanley!"—and Bernard Audley darted on Lilian Halkin a glance that was meant to read deep down into her soul.

"And you dare not deny the conception of such design!" was her immediate response.

"At all events I am not responsible to you for my conduct," he retorted fiercely.

"Nor have you the power to prevent me from doing my best to save that innocent girl from your horrible machinations."

A dreadful expression of concentrated fury passed over the countenance of Bernard Audley; and he was about to give vent to some bitter words—perhaps even imprecations: but checking himself, he said in as mild a tone as he could possibly assume, "Lilian, why do you interfere with me? I do not like to threaten you: but you really provoke me beyond endurance. Do you forget that you are altogether dependent upon me—I will not say my bounty——"

"Bounty!" she echoed, in a strange wild voice, while her eyes flashed sudden fires; "would you now taunt me with my dependence upon you for the morsel of bread that I eat? Think you that if you possessed all the treasures of the universe and were to lavish them upon me, you could compensate for that wreck of hopes which you have made and that blight of affections with which you have stricken me? There are moments when I hate you with a fiendish and malignant hatred, as much as at other times I still love you deeply and devotedly. But mark me well, Bernard Audley! there are likewise moments when I feel so horrible a sensation in my brain that it appears as if I were going mad; and in these intervals do I hate you with the most rancorous hatred—loathe you with the intensest loathing! If then, by word or deed on your part, you only give the slightest impulse to these fevered thoughts of mine—if you only goad me one hair's-breadth beyond the point of wretchedness and misery up to which my soul has been already tortured—I shall hate you without mitigation, loathe you without an interval of softness! Then, in that case, if you drive me mad altogether, I shall do you a mischief—I shall wreak upon you that vengeance which any other woman having endured such wrongs as mine, would have mercilessly and pitilessly wreaked long years ago!"

There was a power in the lady's words and a wild glaring in her eyes which struck Bernard Audley with dismay. Transfixed to the spot and dumb with consternation, he neither moved nor spoke during the lengthy speech which his victim addressed to him; and when she concluded he still continued gazing upon her in a sort of stupor and bewilderment of terror, not knowing how to act or what to say.

"Ah! you are afraid of me?" said Lilian, speaking with less excitement but perhaps with more real bitterness in her words as she thus resumed her address. "Bernard Audley, I know you well; and reading your wicked heart so accurately as I do, it is a wonder that I am even able to love you at all, and to think of you with an affectionate interest which is at times as deep as it was when first you won my attachment. Think you that I comprehend not the motive that has hitherto induced you to allow me the pittance which I receive yearly at your hands? It is not bestowed upon me through love, but because you stand in terror of me. You call me your evil genius: and why? Is it because I have more than once saved you from perpetrating crimes that would perhaps have sent you to the scaffold? Is it because I have saved you from becoming the ravisher of innocence? We were speaking ere now of Louisa Stanley. What, think you, would have been your fate had I not interposed in time to prevent the crowning catastrophe in the cathedral crypt?—and have you forgotten how I wrote an earnest and prayerful letter to the young maiden, beseeching her to keep the outrage secret and spare you an exposure which would have driven you from the Church, stripped your gown from your back, and despoiled you of the means of existence? Ah! so far from being your evil genius, I have been your good genius! And now, because I again step forward to warn you against giving unbridled license to this frenzied passion which you cherish for Louisa, you upbraid me—you taunt me with my dependence upon you; and in your very words is there a covert threat that you will withdraw my pittance if I continue to interfere with your pleasures. Unhappy man! does no warning voice whisper in your soul that those pleasures, if such they be, may yet conduct you to ruin and disgrace?"

"Lilian," said Bernard Audley, who during this second speech had found leisure to regain his composure, "I do not wish to anger you—nor am I desirous that disagreeable words should pass between us. But since we thus stand confronted once more and you have spoken your mind so plainly—since also you have chosen to refer in such pointed terms, not only to the past, but likewise to our relative positions,—let me once for all beg and entreat that you will abstain from any farther inter-

ference in my pursuits. I have long, long ceased to meddle with your's——"

"Yes—because you are heartless and indifferent!" exclaimed Lilian bitterly: "whereas I, throughout a long series of twenty years, have still loved on!"

"Then if all these watchings, and pryings, and peerings result from love," exclaimed Bernard Audley, with mingled passion and scorn, "for heaven's sake give up loving altogether!"

"Ah! do not say *that!*" cried Lilian, a visible shudder sweeping over her frame, as if she felt the influence of a power which she had ever struggled to ward off: "do not say *that*—or it may be I shall follow your advice! Snap but one chord—the *last* which vibrates in my heart—and this love of mine will dissolve suddenly——No, not dissolve: it will turn into the bitterest hatred!"

"I care not!" ejaculated the Minor Canon, his rage now becoming ungovernable. "I detest the sickly sentimentalism which you prate about. Love indeed! there can be none between us. Circumstances destroyed it long, long ago. It is a morbid feeling of jealousy and disappointment which impels you thus to hang upon my footsteps and interfere in my pursuits. I am sick of it—I am wearied of it; and this day, after all you have said, I am more than ever resolved to rid myself of your impertinent supervision!"

"Bernard, this to me?" said Lilian, in a voice of mingled astonishment and reproach, as if she could scarcely believe her ears.

"Yes—this to you!" retorted the Minor Canon, almost maddened with the rage that had flamed up in his soul. "You yourself have provoked the present crisis. It was not I who sought it. You say that I dwell in fear of you? Well, your words prove the morbid hankering which you have to rule me by terrorism. Now, then, let this bond be broken at once. Do your worst—I defy you! Whatever evil you can say of me, must your own name be mixed up in. And now beware how you continue to molest me. By heaven! I will do you a mischief the next time you cross my path. As for your income, that shall be paid regularly as heretofore——"

"Enough!" suddenly ejaculated Lilian, her pale countenance having become ghastly—her lips white and quivering—her whole frame convulsed with the agonizing feelings that raged in her bosom. "Enough! you have said your worst—and you have even dared to threaten your worst! Ah, you will do me a mischief? Then perish all love, and welcome the phase of hatred. Yes—hatred immitigable—unrelieved by a single gleam of tenderness—a hatred that shall arise upon the ruins of withered affections and the best feelings of the heart. As for the pittance you promise to vouchsafe unto me henceforth as heretofore, I scorn it—I repudiate it—I reject it with contempt and abhorrence. Sooner would I drag myself a miserable mendicant through the streets and plunge deep down into penury's most hideous slough, than receive another morsel of bread at your hands. Ah, the crisis is indeed come! Farewell, Bernard Audley. We shall meet again; but when next I stand before you, it will not be with the remnants of a long devoted love in my heart—but with all my wrongs raising the cry of vengeance in my soul!"

Thus speaking, Lilian Halkin darted away from the Minor Canon's presence, and disappeared behind the dense foliage of the evergreens. For a few moments did Bernard Audley remain transfixed to the spot, gazing in the direction where she had thus disappeared, and more than half inclined to call her back: for he felt—indeed he *feared*, that he had gone too far, and that he had unnecessarily given provocation to a spirit the wild strange nature of which he full well knew from past experience. But his pride would not permit him to raise his voice and speak the word of conciliation that might perhaps have recalled her; and at length moving away from the spot where the above scene had taken place, he muttered to himself, "Well, after all, it is perhaps for the best. She may cool down—she may think better of her menaces: and besides, in her foolish fondness she could not altogether find it in her heart to do me harm. Let me banish her from my thoughts, and think only of the adorable Louisa Stanley, whom I shall possess to-night!"

CHAPTER CLXXXVII.

THE MAIDEN'S CHAMBER.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, when Bernard Audley issued forth from his house in the immediate neighbourhood of the Cathedral; and taking a circuitous route, bent his way toward the cottage which he had marked to be the scene of an infamous crime and an immense triumph.

At short intervals he stopped and looked searchingly round to make sure that he was not watched or dogged by Lilian Halkin; and as the night was clear and beautiful, he could see to a considerable distance. Feeling certain that he was not observed nor followed, he pursued his way with increasing hope and confidence, his passions inflamed to an ungovernable extent by the wine which he drunk after dinner. He was therefore not merely resolved to gratify these passions if opportunity should serve as he expected; but he had made up his mind, with a sort of desperation, to dare everything—almost to sacrifice everything—sooner than be baffled or disappointed.

In this mood was it that the Minor Canon arrived at about half-past nine in the close vicinage of the cottage; and concealing himself in the shade of the hedge that surrounded the garden, he watched for the anxiously-expected opportunity. He had now an entire half-hour for sober and deliberate reflection—if he were capable of it: but he was not. His passions were goaded to a degree bordering upon madness: indeed it *was* a madness that now inspired him. If occasionally, for an instant, the whispering of fear should arise in his soul and suggest the possibility of terrific consequences, he at once stifled the salutary warning, crushing it as it were beneath the iron heel of his indomitable resolve. Thus the half-hour passed without accomplishing any change in the purpose of this bold bad man; and as he heard ten o'clock proclaimed from the towers of the numerous churches in Canterbury, he muttered to himself with a deep feeling of exultation, "The moment approaches!"

Scarcely had the iron tongues of Time ceased their loud metallic sounds, when the front-door of the cottage was heard to open; and sweet silvery voices

were the next instant wafted to the Minor Canon's ear. Louisa and Mary were bidding each other an affectionate "Good night." Then Mrs. Owen spoke, saying some kind things to Louisa; and lastly, Louisa's voice was again heard, bidding the servant-maid return as speedily as possible after escorting the two ladies to the *Fountain Hotel.* Then the little party came forth, accompanied by Louisa as far as the garden gate; and in a few moments Bernard Audley beheld Mrs. Owen, Mary, and the servant-maid (whose Christian name by the bye, was also Mary), issue from that gate and proceed in the direction which they had to pursue. Louisa Stanley walked slowly back into the cottage, her very pace indicating the pensiveness naturally experienced from the loss of a loved friend who had been her companion for the greater part of a year.

The sound of the front-door closing reached the Minor Canon's ear; and a strange glow thrilled through his entire frame as he now saw that the opportunity for which he had so anxiously awaited, was at length within his reach. Still he remained for nearly five minutes in his place of concealment; but it was only to watch the movements of Louisa inside the cottage, and of which he could judge by the light burning within. On the upper storey there was one window where a light had been shining all the time the Minor Canon was stationed at his post; and this, he conjectured, must be the chamber tenanted by the aunt. A light had also been burning in the parlour on the ground floor; but soon after Louisa had reentered the cottage, as above described, this light disappeared, and in another minute was seen glimmering through the curtains of a window adjoining that of the chamber which Bernard Audley had calculated to be the aunt's.

"That then is the maiden's own room," he said to himself, as through the hedge he surveyed the window where the light, carried up from the parlour, had just glimmered forth. "Now to enter the cottage!"

Hastening away from his hiding-place, Bernard Audley paused for a few moments at the fence skirting the road, in order to assure himself that his evil genius—as he considered Lilian Halkin to be—was not nigh at hand: and perceiving no one, he without farther hesitation, passed into the garden. At first his intention was to knock at the front-door; and as he knew that only one servant was kept, and this servant was now absent, it would be absolutely necessary for Louisa Stanley herself to answer the summons, when he might rush in and take possession of the citadel. But thinking that if it were possible to gain admittance stealthily, creep up to Louisa's chamber, and vanquish her at the moment of stupor and amazement into which his presence would probably throw her, this plan would be much the better one—he hastily made the circuit of the cottage to *reconnoitre.* There was a back door opening from the kitchen; and this the Minor Canon at once tried. It yielded to his touch; and with a renewed or rather enhancing glow of exultation, he passed into the cottage. As the dwelling was but small, he experienced no trouble in groping his way from the kitchen to the foot of the staircase; and there he paused for a minute to listen.

He heard light feet moving over-head: these could be only the steps of Louisa Stanley,—and he said to himself, "She is going into her aunt's room—perhaps with the intention of remaining there until the servant returns? But no: it was merely to see that her relative was duly cared for. And now she goes back into her own chamber."

He then took off his shoes and crept stealthily as a cat up the carpetted stairs. Fortunately for his design they creaked not; and noiselessly as any intrusive thief, did he ascend to the little landing above. Through a small window shone a sufficiency of light to show him two doors facing each other;—and from the observations he had made ere entering the cottage, he was at no loss to discover which was the one leading into Louisa's room. For a single instant—and only for an instant—he trembled and wished himself away; but the very next moment the thought that on the other side of that door was the beauteous creature whom he had so long and so ardently coveted, made all his passions fire up again with irresistible force. His fingers sought the handle of the door—he turned it: suddenly he rushed in—and a wild shriek thrilled from Louisa's lips as she at once recognised the Hon. and Rev. Bernard Audley.

The young maiden had not begun to prepare for rest when this infamous intrusion took place. She was therefore completely dressed, no article of apparel being laid aside.

The Minor Canon sprang upon her rather with the violence of a tiger than in the manner of a human being; and seizing her round the waist, he said in a hoarse thick voice, "You are mine, Louisa—you are mine. Nothing can save you!"

But again from the young damsel's lips went forth a piercing, rending shriek—a shriek which must have penetrated through wall, and floor, and ceiling, and would have been heard far beyond the cottage were any one passing at the time.

She struggled desperately to release herself from the iron grasp which Bernard Audley had fixed upon her: and at the very instant that he was about to approach his lips to hers, she seized him by the hair and wrenched back his head with an almost superhuman force. And still her tongue sent forth the wildest cries for help.

"By heaven! you shall be mine," said the Minor Canon, in the same hoarse thick voice of concentrated passion as before: and he placed one of his hands upon Louisa's mouth in the hope of stifling her cries.

At this instant a door was heard to open violently: and the next moment a form, looking like a ghost from the grave, appeared upon the threshold of Louisa's chamber. The Minor Canon, stricken with sudden dismay, loosened his hold upon the young damsel; and she, at once breaking from him, rushed wildly towards that spectre-like form, exclaiming, "My aunt! my aunt!"

Miss Stanley—for she indeed it was, habited in her night-clothes, just as she had sprung up from the couch which for three long years she had kept in paralysis and unconsciousness,—threw her arms about the neck of her niece, murmuring, "Louisa, dearest Louisa!"—then as if utterly overpowered by the tremendous effort, she sank down heavily upon the floor.

"Heaven itself wars against me!" exclaimed Bernard Audley: and though through this relapse of the aunt into profound unconsciousness

again Louisa was as much as ever in his power, yet not for worlds dared he lay a finger upon her more.

The feeling that now inspired him was that of an awful superstition: the flame of his maddening passions had been extinguished in a moment: and flying from the room—precipitating himself down the stairs—he rushed from the house as if pursued by some hideous phantom from the grave, or some avenging spirit from the world which lies beyond it.

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Pause we here for a few moments to explain the phenomenon which had just occurred. As the reader is well aware, it was three years since Miss Stanley (as we had better continue to call her, at least for the present—rather than by her real name of Halkin) was stricken with the paralysis that had deprived her of speech and reason. For those three years had she lived on, utterly unconscious of what was passing around her: for although she retained the faculties of sight and hearing, yet all images that met her eyes were reflected in a brain which comprehended them not—and the same was it with all sounds that reached her ears. But the psychological philosopher and the physiological inquirer need only be appealed to in order to testify unto the fact that even in such a prostrate condition of mind and body as that in which Miss Stanley lay stretched and stricken down for three long years, it needs but some incident of a very extraordinary character to dissolve the bonds of paralysis and loosen the mental and physical energies from the shackles placed upon them. So was it in this case. Louisa's piercing shrieks had thrilled through her aunt's brain: the spell was dissolved in a moment—she snapped as it were the chains which held her fast—and mechanically—without having her ideas sufficiently collected even to ask herself what it could all mean—she hastened to her niece's chamber. She came in time to save that excellent girl's virtue from the power of the ravisher—in time too to save her lips from the pollution of his caresses: and as we have already seen, the infamous man stricken with an awful consternation and feeling at the moment that heaven itself warred against his diabolical purpose, fled precipitately in terror and dismay.

What words can express all the varied emotions which Louisa experienced in those few brief instants which elapsed while the phase of her deliverance was passing? The sudden appearance of her aunt filled her with ineffable joy, not only in consequence of her own rescue, which it at once accomplished, but likewise because of the wondrous cure which she thus beheld so suddenly effected. But while all terror on account of Bernard Audley was in a moment dissipated, a new source of alarm and anguish at once presented itself: for this dearly-beloved aunt who had risen from her lethargy of three years to save her, had sunk down into unconsciousness once more.

Oh! with what earnest, heartfelt hope—but with what sore misgivings and direful apprehensions also—did Louisa raise her relative from the carpet and bear her to the couch!—then with what anxious suspense did she watch the effect of the restoratives that she hastened to administer!—and what joy indescribable expanded in her heart as she beheld the invalid slowly open her eyes—but open them in consciousness!

Sinking down upon her knees by the side of the bed, Louisa murmured with deepest fervour, "O God, I thank thee for this!"

"Louisa—sweetest, dearest Louisa," said her aunt, in a low voice, and speaking with difficulty: "what has happened? have I not been dreaming horribly? Methought I heard piercing shrieks——"

"Oh, my beloved aunt! heaven be thanked that you are thus restored to me!" cried Louisa, starting from her knees and embracing her relative with an enthusiasm which was almost wild.

"Restored to you, my dear girl: what mean you?" asked Miss Stanley, gazing earnestly upon the lovely countenance of her niece. "Ah!" she continued, pressing her hand to her forehead as if to collect the thoughts that were in confusion: "I have a feeling here as if something had happened. Yes—there seems to be a gap. I do not remember going to bed last night. Let me think! You and Clara and I were seated together after dinner—we were conversing——and then it seems as if everything had suddenly become a blank. How was it? I do not recollect that we had tea—or that you bade me good night—or that I went up to bed as usual——But heavens, dearest Louisa! you are weeping—weeping bitterly too? Come, dear child—tell me—what mean these tears?"

Louisa could not speak: she tried to say something,—but her voice was choked in sobs. It was indeed a scene profoundly touching for the poor girl. Three years had elapsed since the day of which her aunt had been speaking—that day when she was suddenly stricken down with paralysis; and a blank had indeed from that moment been the interval for her until the present one.

"You have been ill—very, very ill," at length sobbed forth the weeping girl.

"Ill!—very ill!" repeated Miss Stanley: then after pausing for nearly a minute, as if to ascertain precisely what all her feelings and sensations were, she said, "Yes, I have now a kind of intuitive knowledge that I have been ill—very ill, as you say, my dearest Louisa. Perhaps then I have been ill for some days?—or it may be for some weeks?"

"Yes, dear aunt," returned Louisa, now wiping her eyes; for that flood of tears had relieved her surcharged heart: "a great many, many weeks—and I wept because it cut me to the very quick to think that a portion of your life should have thus passed away as an utter blank to you, and that now when you awake to consciousness once more, you should speak of the day on which you were taken ill as if it were but *yesterday!*"

"Louisa love, you alarm me," said the aunt, looking intently up into her niece's countenance. "Have I then been ill so long—so very long?"

"Dear aunt, there is nothing now to alarm you. See—I weep no more: I am happy—yes, heaven knows I am happy now!—and sincerely do I thank God Almighty for this great goodness on his part."

"And I also feel in my soul a deep gratitude to that Providence which has thus restored me to you," said Miss Stanley, in a very serious tone: "for I know full well how imperiously necessary my life is to the welfare of yourself and dear Clara. But where is Clara? Go and fetch her to me: I long to embrace her——"

"Dear aunt, do not excite yourself too much now," said Louisa, not offering to move from the couch by the side of which she stood half-bending over her invalid relative: "for of course I have a great many things to tell you ——"

"But nothing wrong? Has any evil happened?" asked Miss Stanley, with feverish haste.

"No—nothing—nothing wrong—every thing happy and prosperous, so far as we are concerned:" —and a blush mantled on Louisa's countenance as she felt that her allusion partly referred to her own engagement with Jocelyn Loftus.

"But where is Clara? why do you not go and fetch her?" asked Miss Stanley, whose sight was yet too feeble to enable her to notice that crimson glow upon her young niece's countenance.

"Clara, my dear aunt, is not at home at this moment. She is staying with some friends—some very kind friends—with whom she has been a year and upwards ——"

"Louisa!" ejaculated Miss Stanley, actually shivering with affright. "Do you mean me to understand that I have been so long ill—so long insensible?"

"Yes, dear aunt," replied Louisa, softly; "more than that. But pray don't excite yourself: you must not—really you must not."

"Tell me at once then, dear girl, how long I have been ill, if you would save me from the most torturing suspense."

"I will, dear aunt—I will tell you everything," said Louisa, perceiving how necessary it was to give the required explanations guardedly and gradually. "It is more than a year—but now, thank heaven, you are recovered at last. It is more than two years——Dear aunt, do not, do not excite yourself——'tis three years since you were first taken ill."

"Three years!" repeated Miss Stanley in a low hollow voice, as if absolutely dismayed and struck with consternation by the announcement: then after a brief pause, during which an almost awful seriousness settled upon her features, she said, "Now tell me, Louisa—tell me truly——for I hope that on my recovery I find the same good girls whom I left, as it were, when sinking into this dreadful lethargy of three long years——tell me, I ask, how you have lived in the interval?"

"Dear aunt, we learnt from the bank that you had obtained your money from Mr. Beckford in London; and the banker wrote to him. He replied that he would pay us as regularly as he was wont to pay you——"

"Ah! thank God!" exclaimed Miss Stanley, evidently experiencing an indescribable relief. "Then you have not been without resources? But now let me look at you, Louisa. Draw back the curtain——more still—stand with your face so that the light may fall upon it. There—that is as I could wish! And now I feel my sight improving——I can see you as plainly as I was wont. What a charming girl you have grown! Let me reflect! You are twenty. Yes, you are a sweet girl: and God in his mercy be thanked, there is the same unmistakable innocence in your looks—the same purity, and chastity, and candour upon your brow! Come and embrace me, sweet girl—come to my arms: for again I thank God that I awake to find you all that I could wish."

Louisa kissed her aunt with enthusiastic devotion: and for some time they spoke not, but gazed upon each other in deep and fervid thankfulness for what might be termed a blessed restoration.

"But now," said the aunt, at length breaking silence once more, "tell me what meant that dreadful screaming. For I recollect what it was that must have startled me from my stupendous lethargy. And, ah! was there not some man here?"

"A villain who found his way to my chamber," replied Louisa.

"But who was he?" asked Miss Stanley.

"You would scarcely believe it, aunt," replied the young maiden: "but it is nevertheless true. That man is the Rev. Bernard Audley, one of the Minor Canons."

"Heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Miss Stanley, her countenance expressing some other feeling besides indignation on her niece's account. "Bernard Audley! and he in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes, dear aunt—he is a Minor Canon of the Cathedral," responded Louisa; "and was appointed about eighteen months ago. But do you know him? why do you gaze upon me in this manner? do you think I am deceiving you? Heavens! I am incapable——"

"Hush, dear Louisa! not for a moment do I doubt your word. But I am astonished: for that name is indeed full well—*too well* known to me! Bernard Audley is a villain of the blackest dye."

"And I, dear aunt, have been more than once the object of his persecutions," Louisa observed. "On the first occasion—it was in the Dane John—he accosted me and was very rude: but I was rescued from his impertinent molestation by a young gentleman—a very excellent young gentleman—Clara has made all inquiries concerning him, and has ascertained that he is of the highest character——"

"Ah! I understand," said Miss Stanley, whose sight was now strong enough to enable her to observe the tell-tale blush upon Louisa's cheeks. "You love him? Well, my dear girl, if he be indeed all that you represent, and you have ascertained that he is so, there is no harm in a virtuous attachment."

"Ah! my dearest aunt, when you come to know Jocelyn Loftus, you will welcome him most kindly!" said Louisa, again embracing Miss Stanley. "He will be here in a few days—I had a letter from him this morning, dated from Geneva. It is a very, very sad business which has detained him there; but it was to be all over yesterday—and then he was to leave at once for England. His name is not Jocelyn Loftus——"

"Heavens, what do you tell me?" asked Miss Stanley, all her confidence damped, and naturally so, by this announcement, artlessly and ingenuously though it was made.

"There is nothing to fear, aunt," continued the young damsel. "Through no unworthy motive has Jocelyn Loftus taken this name; and he would have given me all requisite explanations when he was last in England, but he said he would rather postpone them till the eve of our marriage, when he would reveal everything. They are family circumstances which have made him adopt a feigned name; and I, having the fullest confidence and

placing the utmost reliance in him, cheerfully consented to wait his own good will and pleasure for those explanations. To-morrow, dear aunt, I will show you all his letters; and then you shall judge for yourself what his character and disposition really are."

"And how long have you known him?" asked Miss Stanley, reassured once more by the frankness with which her niece spoke and the confidence in which she referred to her lover's letters.

"A year—very nearly," replied Louisa: then casting down her eyes bashfully, and with a blush again mantling upon her countenance, she said, "We should have been married some time ago; and then it was his intention to have you conveyed in a carriage, built expressly for the purpose, to our future home—a beautiful mansion which he possesses in Northumberland; for believe me, my dear aunt, that Jocelyn—as we must of course still call him for the present—has ever spoken of you with the kindest interest; and when we have been talking over our future plans, your welfare and comforts have entered largely into the arrangements thus laid down."

"I am delighted, my dear Louisa," observed Miss Stanley, "to hear all that you are telling me. Yes—I see that this young gentleman must be honourable and well-intentioned; and I have now no doubt he will give satisfactory explanations for the adoption of a fictitious name. Perhaps he may even turn out to be some one of a more elevated rank than you suppose."

"Clara has hinted something to this effect in one of her recent letters," said Louisa: "but I never suffer that idea to dwell in my mind. I do not wish him to be more than he appears: at all events, if he were a Prince I should not love him more than I do. And now, my dear aunt, I should mention to you that the business which has taken him to the Continent is in itself of a nature to win

your esteem—although it has been connected with some dreadful adventures:"—and Louisa shuddered visibly as she spoke. "But it was not his fault——"

"Explain yourself, my dear child," said Miss Stanley. "Do not fear of exciting me too much. I feel strong in body and intellect to a surprising extent, considering all things."

"Jocelyn Loftus," resumed Louisa, "went abroad for the purpose of defeating a dreadful conspiracy which was devised against the Princess of Wales, and in which certain young ladies named Owen——"

"Ah! Owen?" repeated Miss Stanley. "Tell me their Christian names?" she inquired eagerly.

"Agatha—Emma——"

"Enough!—it is they!" ejaculated the aunt.

"What! you know them? you have heard of them?" cried Louisa. "This is most strange. You knew Mr. Audley's name: you now know these. But perhaps you will be astonished when I tell you that Mary Owen, the youngest of the four sisters—and oh! so different from the rest—has been an inmate of this cottage for the last ten or eleven months——"

"Then do *you* know who she is?" asked Miss Stanley in astonishment.

"Yes—the daughter of Mrs. Owen who has hitherto dwelt at Richmond near London, but who is now in Canterbury and has been here the greatest portion of this day."

"Louisa, you astound me! Did she tell you anything particular?"

"No—nothing," was the response. "She is very unhappy, and has taken Mary away with her. One of her daughters — Emma — was murdered at Geneva: Agatha and Julia have gone mad——"

"Oh! these are indeed frightful things!" exclaimed Miss Stanley with a cold shudder, and the tears trickled down her cheeks: then after a long pause, she said, "Has Mrs. Owen left Canterbury? will she come to see you again?"

"Yes—she will not quit England for two or three days. But hark! I hear footsteps on the stairs," exclaimed Louisa, momentarily frightened by the sound; for she feared lest it should be the Minor Canon returning: but all in a moment recollecting that the servant had gone out, she said, "It is Mary" (alluding to the domestic) "come back. She has been to escort Mrs. Owen and her daughter to the Hotel."

It will be impossible to describe the mingled astonishment and joy with which the faithful servant received the intelligence that Miss Stanley had in so marvellous a manner shaken off the spell of paralysis and regained possession alike of her physical powers and her mental energies. But when she heard the adventure which had led to this sudden and almost miraculous recovery, the indignation she experienced that such an outrage should have been offered to Louisa was succeeded by a feeling of enthusiastic joy, as she exclaimed, "Well, Miss, after all we have to a certain extent to thank that wicked clergyman for his intrusion, since you have escaped unharmed, and your aunt has been revived by the occurrence."

Then the faithful servant was admitted into the chamber; and with tears did she offer her congratulations to Miss Stanley for what had taken place.

"My dear Louisa," said the aunt, "you must now retire to rest, Mary will remain with me for the night. Nay, but I insist upon it! You can arise early in the morning and come to me again: for we have still many things to talk about—and though my curiosity is keenly excited to question you on several points, so that from your lips I may learn all that has happened, even to the minutest details, during this long blank in my existence, yet must I restrain that curiosity until the morrow. I know that I ought not to yield to exciting influences. Indeed, I experience some fatigue already. Therefore leave me, dearest Louisa: I think that I shall soon go to sleep."

The young maiden accordingly embraced her aunt, and then retired to rest in another chamber.

CHAPTER CLXXXVIII.

APPREHENSIONS AND SUSPICIONS.

THE opening flowers were giving forth their perfume to the freshness of the morning air—and the churches in the old cathedral-city were proclaiming the hour of six—when Louisa Stanley, having risen and performed the avocations of the toilet, noiselessly entered the chamber where her aunt now lay. She met the maid-servant who was coming out at the moment, and she saw by that faithful domestic's countenance that there was everything still to hope in respect to the invalid, and that no relapse had taken place. The aunt had passed a good night, and was now awake. She accordingly welcomed her niece with a most affectionate interest, and bidding her sit down by the bed-side, said, "We must now, dear Louisa, resume the thread of our discourse where it was broken off last night. We had been talking about Mrs. Owen and her daughters, you remember, when Mary" (alluding to the servant-maid) "came back. I did not choose, after you left the room, to question her relative to a single thing. I not only feared the consequences of a prolonged excitement, but was anxious to receive all explanations from your lips. Let us now speak of Clara."

"Dear aunt," said Louisa, producing a packet of letters, "I have brought you all the correspondence I have received either from my sister or from Jocelyn Loftus. Here it is, entirely at your disposal."

"You are a good girl, Louisa," said Miss Stanley; "and it is to me a source of indescribable comfort and satisfaction to find you thus frank, open-hearted, and ingenuous as ever."

"Without vanity, and without egotism, my dear aunt," said Louisa, in a soft tone, and with genuine sincerity in her looks, "I can conscientiously declare that I have never, during your long illness, harboured a thought, done a deed, or taken a single step, which I should be ashamed for you to know. And now at once, before we speak of aught else, let me confess that I quitted you on one occasion—but not without the deep conviction and assurance that in Mary Owen I left an excellent substitute and kind guardian."

"But whither did you go, my dear Louisa?" asked Miss Stanley, surprised, though neither alarmed nor angered, at the confession which her niece was now making.

"I went to Paris," replied the maiden. "Indeed I was inveigled thither in a most ungenerous and unhandsome manner by a nobleman named the Marquis of Leveson; and for a time I was rendered very wretched indeed by an attempt which he made to induce me to believe that Jocelyn Loftus was not only unfaithful to me, but also a very bad man. Ah, my dear aunt! I was very, very unhappy then. The Marquis brought me back to England; and I was induced to accompany him to London. There he threw off the mask and endeavoured to treat me vilely—aided also by his niece, a lady so very beautiful and seeming so good that I was at first completely prepossessed in her favour. Oh! I shudder when I think how nearly I was destroyed and undone by the Marquis of Leveson and Lady Ernestina Dysart! But heaven sent a kind friend to my deliverance; and this was done through Clara's instrumentality. Then I saw Clara, and came straight home again to the cottage. Clara convinced me that my suspicions relative to Jocelyn Loftus had been most unfounded. In due course he himself returned from Paris, where he had been kept in prison through the most wicked devices; and he then satisfied me, even if I were not previously convinced, how cruelly he had been wronged by those suspicions. A letter came from the Princess Sophia, requesting him to go to London: he did so—and when he returned he was compelled to set off again for the Continent. This was six or seven months ago; and there he has been ever since. But, as I told you last night, he will be home in a day or two, having fully succeeded in unmasking the conspiracy which had been devised against the Princess of Wales. And now, my dear aunt, I have given you a rapid but faithful outline of all that concerns myself."

"You have indeed passed through many and serious adventures, my dear girl," said Miss Stanley: "but since you have escaped in security and safety, no cause for regret or sorrow remains behind. I long to see this Jocelyn Loftus—the correspondent as well as the champion of Princesses. He must be a noble character! But now tell me everything that concerns Clara. You said last night that she was staying with some kind friends, and that she had been with them a year——"

"Did I not name the Beckfords?" asked Louisa ingenuously.

"The Beckfords!" ejaculated Miss Stanley, with a sort of subdued scream and a convulsive start. "What mean you? There are no such people in existence!" she cried, in the excitement of her feelings, and without pausing to weigh the import of her words.

Louisa gazed upon her in speechless astonishment.

"Ah! since I have thus suffered that revelation to escape my lips," cried Miss Stanley, still fearfully excited, "I will not attempt to recall it."

"But, my dear aunt," said Louisa, now recovering the power of speech, "every letter which I have received from Clara speaks of Mr. and Mrs. Beckford. She is living with them—they have adopted her—it is they who have given her the means of supplying me with money—and indeed it was at their house that I saw Clara when in London."

"What dreadful delusion is all this?—what fearful mystery is involved herein," exclaimed the aunt, actually writhing in her couch with the tortures of misgiving and suspense. "The Beckfords' house, you say! But where was it? in what square or street?"

"Oh!" returned Louisa, "they have removed some time ago from No. 20, Hanover Square, to No. 13, Stratton Street; and it was at this latter place that I saw Clara."

"But did you see any one passing by the name of Beckford?" inquired the aunt, still with the most fevered impatience.

"No: Mr. and Mrs. Beckford were not in town at the moment. But here are Clara's letters, confirming all I tell you," added Louisa, both pained and frightened at the strange manner of mingled incredulity, astonishment, and alarm in which her aunt gazed up at her.

"Let me see them," cried Miss Stanley. "Leave all this correspondence with me. Draw back the window-curtain a little. There—that will do! And now go down, my dear child, and see about the breakfast. Come up to me again presently. But do not be alarmed, dear Louisa, at anything I may have said. I know that *you* are artless, ingenuous, and good. There is innocence in all your looks ——"

"Oh! tell me, my dear aunt," exclaimed the young maiden, the tears gushing forth upon her long lashes,—"tell me whether you apprehend any harm relative to Clara:—for I know not how it is, but your words have excited dreadful misgivings in my mind!"

"My dear girl, I dare not conceal from you the fact that there *is* some mystery which must be cleared up," said her aunt in a solemn voice. "I am bewildered—I cannot understand it——"

"But you said there were no such persons as Mr. and Mrs. Beckford?" exclaimed Louisa, hurriedly.

"There *was* one who, for certain reasons, bore that name—but it was not his real one:"—then after a few moments' pause, Miss Stanley asked, "Has Clara ever mentioned to you in her letters a certain Sir Archibald Malvern?"

"Sir Archibald Malvern?" echoed the young maiden. "No—Clara has never spoken of him: but I read in the newspaper a day or two ago—for I sometimes borrow a newspaper from the circulating library—especially since those dreadful things occurred at Geneva——"

"But what were you going to tell me?" interrupted the aunt impatiently. "You read in the newspaper——"

"That a certain Sir Archibald Malvern, whose mysterious disappearance had for more than a year past caused the greatest affliction to his son and to his numerous friends, had been found——"

"Alive?" asked Miss Stanley, with almost a wild quickness.

"No—his remains were discovered in some suburban villa—near London," responded Louisa; "and they were interred accordingly. The paragraph was very brief; and I have given you the substance of it."

"What you now tell me," observed the aunt, "increases the mystery relative to Clara. Ah! I see you are surprised at this intimation that the death of Sir Archibald Malvern, or even the bare mention of his name, can have aught to do with the matters of which we are speaking: but the ramifications of all

these mysteries—for they are many, and they are deep," added Miss Stanley emphatically,—"are so strangely interwoven——"

"Oh! you terrify me, my dear aunt!" said Louisa. "Can any harm have happened to Clara?"—then, as a sudden reminiscence struck her, she went on to say, "I do indeed know that London is a very dangerous place, and that amongst all classes, but especially the highest, there are great numbers of bad and profligate people. That Lady Ernestina Dysart, the Marquis of Leveson's niece, of whom I spoke just now, was led to tell me—I know not in what strange mood at the time—many strange things about the profligacy of the fashionable world; and she especially quoted as an instance a certain celebrated Beauty named Venetia Trelawney, who by her arts and wiles had raised herself to the peerage. Having married a gentleman named Sackville, she and her husband—Lord and Lady Sackville—dwell at Carlton House; and she is the great favourite of the Prince Regent."

"But what, my dear Louisa," interrupted Miss Stanley, "has all this to do with the topics of our discourse?"

"Nothing—except that all that I heard concerning this Venetia Trelawney—or rather Lady Sackville," rejoined Louisa, "has for some reason or another—I cannot define what—made a considerable impression on my mind, and has often intruded itself upon my thoughts. Perhaps it was because the wicked example of this Lady Sackville made me fear for my beloved sister Clara, placed as she is in a metropolis abounding with such temptations and she herself being of such a rare beauty. For you know not, dear aunt, how wonderfully Clara has improved! When I saw her seven or eight months ago in London—although only after a separation of a like interval—I was struck by that improvement. Ah! I felt so proud of her: for there is really something grand and imposing in Clara's looks: she has become quite the polished lady——And, Oh!" exclaimed the artless young maiden, her thoughts in their excitement thus rapidly ranging from one topic to another,—"what pleasure shall I have in writing to her to-day, to inform her of your recovery and beseech her to return home at once to see you. And she too will be so overjoyed; for you will perceive by her letters what affectionate mention she always makes of you."

"Leave me then, dear child," said Miss Stanley, "to the perusal of the letters; and when you come up again in an hour or so, we shall perhaps have some farther conversation upon these serious topics."

Louisa accordingly quitted the chamber, and descended to the parlour, where the table was already spread for breakfast. It was now past eight o'clock; and the young maiden placed upon a tray the requisite refreshments for her aunt, and sent them up by the servant. She herself left the morning meal untasted: her heart was filled with a variety of conflicting emotions. She had every reason for satisfaction in her aunt's recovery and in the prospect of her lover's speedy return to England: but on the other hand she experienced certain misgivings and uneasy suspicions in consequence of what Miss Stanley had said relative to Clara and the Beckfords. Perhaps the reader will ask what course she intended to take with regard to the Rev. Bernard Audley, and whether she purposed to pass over his vile conduct in silence? This subject likewise entered into the maiden's thoughts: but as Jocelyn Loftus would so soon return to England, she resolved to let the matter stand over until she saw him.

Issuing forth from the parlour, where the untasted meal remained upon the table, she rambled in the garden. At nine o'clock she sent the servant up to inquire whether her aunt was yet prepared to receive her; and the reply brought back was that Miss Stanley had not been able as yet to go entirely through the correspondence. Louisa accordingly remained walking in the garden; and thus nearly another hour passed away. The postman now made his appearance with a letter; and Louisa, on receiving it, at once recognized the writing of her sister Clara. Tearing it open, she read the following lines:—

"London, Tuesday Evening.
"July 19th, 1815.

"I take up my pen, dearest Louisa, to write you a few hurried words that you may be prepared to see me to-morrow—Wednesday. I shall leave London at about nine o'clock, and shall be in Canterbury by three in the afternoon. Shortly after that hour you may expect to see me. A circumstance has occurred—a secret indeed has come to my knowledge, intimately concerning us both. It is, in short, the secret of our birth, relative to which there are many strange things that we never knew before. I tell you this much in order that you may be prepared for the revelation I have to make. I shall not come alone Sir Valentine Malvern, from whose lips I myself have learnt that solemn secret, will accompany me.

"But this is not all, dear Louisa. I shall avail myself of the same opportunity to make known certain matters connected with myself; and here, likewise in order to prepare you for this intelligence and to guard you against the too sudden effects of a surprise, I must at once inform you that I am married. Yes—I am married; and the alliance is one which in a worldly point of view may be proclaimed with pride. It is not however Sir Valentine Malvern who is my husband: nor indeed will my husband accompany me upon the present occasion. But I can say no more now—save and except that I hope to find our beloved aunt as well as under circumstances she possibly can be.

"Ten thousand kisses, dearest Louisa, from
"Your affectionate sister,
"CLARA."

Louisa was overjoyed at the receipt of this letter; and the moment she had rapidly scanned its contents, without waiting to reflect upon them, she flew light as the fawn up to the chamber where her aunt lay,—exclaiming, "Clara is coming home to-day! She will be here between three and four this afternoon! She is married too—and the alliance is an excellent one!"

The aunt, whose countenance wore a look of the utmost seriousness and indeed affliction at the moment when Louisa thus burst into her presence, half started up in the couch with wonder and excitement as the young damsel gave rapid vent to those ejaculations. Then, taking the letter from Louisa's hand, Miss Stanley hurriedly perused its contents; and sinking upon her pillow, she murmured, "Thank God! whatever may have happened, Clara is married!"

Louisa did not notice that these words were spoken with a feeling of relief produced by the letter: for the young lady was too overjoyed by the prospect of embracing her sister to have eyes or ears for any other subject.

"Are you not glad, aunt, that Clara is coming?"

he inquired: "and are you not well pleased that she is married so happily?"

"I am indeed well pleased," answered Miss Stanley, as she flung a look upon the letters with which the coverlid of the bed was strown: for the perusal of those letters had filled the worthy woman's mind with the sorest alarm, not merely respecting the welfare, but the integrity, truthfulness, and honour of her elder niece, Clara.

"But what secret is it that she has to reveal?" exclaimed Louisa: "and relative to our birth too! Surely, dear aunt, *you* are well acquainted with all that? I never thought there was any mystery at all connected with it. Was not our dear father your brother?—was he not killed in battle during the Flemish campaigns?—and did not his loss break our poor mother's heart?"

"Let us not say another word upon this topic now," interrupted the aunt. "Nor indeed will we at present renew our conversation upon any topic on which we have previously spoken. I am heartily glad that Clara is coming: for all mysteries—such as they are, and whatever they may be—shall and must now be cleared up. Heaven be thanked that Clara is married!" added Miss Stanley, thus again giving verbal expression to the relief her mind had experienced on her elder niece's account.

CHAPTER CLXXXIX.

CLARA.

It will be recollected that Lilian Halkin had promised Mrs. Owen to call upon her at the *Fountain Hotel;* and it was accordingly about two o'clock on the day of which we are writing that the former proceeded to that establishment and was introduced into the room where her sister and Mary were seated. Immediately upon making her appearance, Lilian raised the dark veil which she was accustomed to wear over her countenance; and walking straight up to Mary, took her by the hand—looked steadfastly at her—and then said abruptly, but in the soft mild tone which habitually characterised her voice, "Innocence is written in your features, my dear girl! For heaven's sake retain such a goodly imprint for ever!"

"Embrace your aunt, Mary," said Mrs. Owen: then as the young girl threw herself into Lilian's arms, the mother continued to observe, "Mary knows that you are my sister—knows also that the bedridden invalid on whom she has so often tended, is her aunt likewise—and that the charming Louisa who gave her an asylum is her cousin."

"Ah! then you have given your daughter certain explanations?" said Lilian, turning to Mrs. Owen after having affectionately embraced Mary.

"Yes, *certain explanations*," rejoined Mrs. Owen with marked emphasis, as much as to imply that those explanations were limited. "Now, dear Mary, you can retire to your own chamber for the present: your aunt and I have much to talk about—and presently we shall go together to the cottage to see our poor sister. We shall not ask you to accompany us on this occasion; but in the evening it is probable that we will either come back and conduct you thither, or else get Louisa to send up the servant to fetch you."

"Oh! pray do not disappoint me," exclaimed Mary. "I long to call Louisa by the endearing name of *cousin*."

"You shall see her again to-day, my dear child," said Mrs. Owen.

Mary then withdrew from the apartment; and the two sisters were left alone together.

"It appears then," said Lilian, "that you have decided upon making yourself known to Louisa?"

"Yes—I passed all the afternoon and evening in her company after you and I separated in the Dane John; and her conduct was most kind and cordial towards me. Indeed she is an excellent-hearted girl, and evidently believes that the cruel misfortunes I have experienced in respect to my three eldest daughters, are an ample chastisement for all that I have done. And such indeed I feel it: for the infliction is great and terrible!"

The two sisters then sat down together and conversed for a long time upon many matters. They gave mutual explanations relative to various circumstances which before were only partially known to each other, and which intimately concerned themselves. But as we shall presently have to combine the histories of the four sisters—Lydia, Anne, Melissa, and Lilian Halkin—all in one narrative, it is not here necessary to anticipate any portion thereof. Suffice it to say that in sincere penitence for the past did these two sisters mingle their tears together; and their explanations being over, they decided upon at once repairing to the cottage, in order to make known their relationship to Louisa, and also to see their invalid sister, whose restoration to consciousness and comparative health they little suspected.

But in paying this visit they had deemed it better to go alone, there being something solemn and sacred in the proceeding, and they feared lest in any unguarded moment they might let fall from their lips more than they chose the youthful Mary to know. Indeed, when Mrs. Owen had declared that she had given her daughter *certain explanations*, it was as much as to say that she had revealed nothing of the past beyond the bare fact of the relationships above announced.

Mrs. Owen and Lilian Halkin were prepared to issue forth, when a travelling-carriage and four drove into the court-yard of the *Fountain Hotel*, and the two ladies paused for an instant at the window of the apartment to observe who should alight. A servant in livery leapt down from the box and opened the door of the carriage. A tall handsome young gentleman, dressed in deep black, first stepped out, and then assisted a lady to alight. This lady had a veil over her face: but as she descended the steps of the carriage, it blew aside with a sudden gust of wind—and Mrs. Owen, catching a glimpse of the splendid countenance thus revealed, exclaimed, "It is Lady Sackville!"

"What! Lady Sackville the celebrated Court beauty, with whose fame all England has rung?" asked Lilian.

"The same," replied Mrs. Owen. "But see how quickly she replaces her veil, as if she did not choose to be observed by the hotel-servants who are thronging about the carriage."

"Do you know her ladyship?" asked Lilian.

"Not to speak to. But I have many times seen her riding in her carriage in London. That is not her husband who is with her. I know Lord

Sackville well by sight: and this is not he. Surely it cannot be an elopement?"

"Ah! my dear sister," said Lilian, "let us not suffer our thoughts to be diverted from our own affairs to those of other people. Come—it is three o'clock—let us away to the cottage. Remember, we have promised poor little Mary that she shall see Louisa again this evening."

"Come then—let us away," said Mrs. Owen.

The two sisters accordingly went forth together. Taking no farther notice of the equipage which had just arrived, they passed out from the court-yard of the spacious hotel into the street, and then took the shortest way to the Dane John. This they threaded quickly, and in a very short time reached the cottage.

Louisa, who was anxiously looking from the window of the chamber where her aunt lay to watch for the arrival of her sister, beheld Mrs. Owen in company with another lady, likewise dressed in black; and she was at once struck with the idea that this *other lady* was the one who had rescued her a year back from the power of Bernard Audley in the Cathedral-crypt.

"Who is it?" inquired her aunt, on hearing an ejaculation drop from the young maiden's lip.

"Mrs. Owen, with another lady," replied Louisa. "I will hasten and say what you have told me."

Thereupon she quitted the chamber; and proceeding down stairs, welcomed Mrs. Owen and her companion into the parlour. Then, before another word was spoken, the delighted girl exclaimed, "My dear aunt has recovered! The paralysis has left her—she has regained the use of her limbs—and what is better still, the powers of her intellect! She wishes to see you immediately, Mrs. Owen, and has desired me to show you up before any further explanations take place. These are her own words."

The astonishment of Mrs. Owen and Lilian, on hearing such startling intelligence from Louisa's lips, may be conceived more easily than described; and the tears gushed forth from their eyes.

"But how, my dear girl," asked Mrs. Owen, "did this wonderful result come about?"

"First tell me, my dear madam," asked Louisa, "why you have not brought Mary with you? I hope she is not unwell——"

"No—I have promised that she shall come in the evening, if it be agreeable to you. But tell me about this wonderful occurrence."

"It happened last night," returned Louisa; "almost immediately after you were gone. Indeed, I should have sent a note or a message to the hotel to make you and Mary acquainted with the circumstance, only I have been expecting you to come all the morning——and then, too, I have had so many other things to occupy my attention."

"But the way in which the cure was accomplished?" interrupted Mrs. Owen. "Surely the paralysis did not subside altogether in a moment, and of its own accord?"

"No," exclaimed Louisa. "It was a circumstance which for an instant seemed fraught with a terrible danger to me:"—then suddenly checking herself, she threw her eyes hesitatingly and timidly upon Lilian; for the impression was still in her mind that this lady *was* the identical one who had saved her in the crypt and had brought her home on that memorable night in the Minor Canon's own carriage.

"You regard me as if you thought you knew me?" said Lilian, in her soft gentle voice. "Ah! I know what idea is uppermost in your mind! Yes—we have indeed met before," she continued, taking Louisa's hand and surveying her with a mournful but tender interest. "I have to thank you for the forbearance which you showed in compliance with that anonymous note that I left for you——"

"Ah lady!" interrupted Louisa; "and I have to thank *you* for your timely succour upon that occasion."

"But about your aunt, my dear girl?" Mrs. Owen again observed.

Louisa gave no reply, but once more threw her looks deprecatingly and timidly upon Lilian.

"I begin to understand something!" cried this unhappy lady: "a light breaks in upon me! Something has occurred in reference to *him* again? Speak, Louisa——Pardon me for addressing you thus familiarly: but you will presently learn that I have a right to do so! Speak, I say—fear not—tell us all that occurred."

"Since you desire me, I will do so," said the young maiden. "Last night Mr. Audley——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Lilian. "I thought so. But go on—go on."

"Mr. Audley stole into the house—gained access to my chamber——"

"The villain!" muttered Lilian between her set teeth.

"Do not interrupt," hastily whispered Mrs. Owen: then turning to Louisa, she said, "Proceed, dear girl."

"His behaviour was most rude—most violent," continued our charming heroine: "but my screams accomplished that which the physician's art had for three long years vainly attempted! God would not suffer me to be injured: and those cries which I sent forth startled my aunt from the stupor of lethargy—loosened her limbs from the bonds of paralysis—and brought her in time to save me! Mr. Audley fled, no doubt conscience-stricken——"

"The villain!" again muttered Lilian Halkin: then for an instant—but only for a single instant—an expression of fierce vindictiveness passed over her countenance.

"This is miraculous—truly wonderful!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen, speaking with a kind of religious awe.

"Yes—the finger of Providence is indeed visible therein!" observed Lilian.

"But you must now proceed up-stairs and see my aunt," said Louisa, hastily addressing herself to Mrs. Owen. "Indeed, I have done wrong perhaps to detain you even for these few minutes in the parlour: for my aunt emphatically enjoined me to bid you walk up the moment you arrived. You are to go up alone: I am not to accompany you."

"But you will permit this lady, who is my sister," said Mrs. Owen, "to go with me?"

"Your sister?" exclaimed Louisa, in surprise: for Mary had never mentioned to her that her mother had any sisters living.

"Yes—this lady is my sister," rejoined Mrs. Owen. "But you will doubtless know more pre-

sently, my dear girl. At all events, she must accompany me."

Louisa offered no objection. It seemed to her that Mrs. Owen knew full well what she was doing; and the maiden moreover perceived that there was in all this proceeding a mystery of which she could form no idea, but which, according to the hints dropped, was presently to be cleared up.

Mrs. Owen and Lilian Halkin now quitted the parlour and ascended to the bedroom where Miss Stanley lay. Louisa did not follow; and the door closed immediately behind them. We need not penetrate into that room to describe the meeting of Lydia Halkin (which was Miss Stanley's real name) with her sisters Anne and Lilian: nor will we pause to describe all that took place between them. That the interview was affecting in the extreme may be full readily conceived: for Miss Stanley possessed a kind, a generous, and a forgiving heart—and whatever might have been the errors, the faults, or the crimes of her two sisters, she was not disposed to make them the subject of reproach and anger, but of compassion and pardon.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, during which interval Louisa remained below in the parlour, watching from the window with intense anxiety for the appearance of her sister. Presently her aunt's bell rang—the servant went up in response to the summons—and speedily came down again with the intimation that Louisa herself was wanted upstairs.

The young maiden, now feeling a presentiment that she stood upon the threshold of the revelation of a mystery, and with a strange fluttering at the heart, ascended the stairs. Upon entering the room, she at once saw that her aunt, Mrs. Owen, and Lilian had been weeping, but that there was a degree of affectionate tenderness in their looks which showed that the interview had not been altogether without its pleasurable feeling.

"Come near, Louisa," said Miss Stanley: "approach, dear girl. This is the day for revelations and the clearing up of mysteries. Know then, that these are *my* sisters—therefore *your* aunts—and Mary Owen, who has so long been your companion and whom I am now so anxious to behold, is your cousin!"

Louisa received these announcements with amazement; but speedily yielding to the impulse of her heart, she embraced first Mrs. Owen and then Lilian. These two ladies, one after the other, folded the sweet maiden in the fondest clasp, and lavished upon her the most endearing epithets.

"Now you can retire again, Louisa," said Miss Stanley. "At a convenient opportunity I will explain to you certain things connected with the past which it becomes necessary for you to know. Retire, my dear child—and wait down stairs to receive her whom you are so anxiously expecting."

The young maiden accordingly withdrew: but at the very instant she reached the bottom of the stairs she heard a knock at the front door. The visitors, whoever they were, had entered the garden gate and had arrived thus far during the scene up-stairs. With a wildly fluttering heart, Louisa opened the door; and the next instant she was caught in the arms of her sister.

"Dearest Clara!"

"Dearest Louisa!"

These were the ejaculations which sprang from their lips; and fervid, rapturous, and enthusiastic were the kisses which they exchanged, their tears also mingling. Then Louisa led her sister into the parlour, not noticing in the fulness of her joy that a tall handsome young man was standing upon the threshold. He, however, followed the two sisters into the parlour; and with tears also in his eyes did he behold them embrace again and again.

"Oh! my beloved Clara, you have come home at last," murmured Louisa, in a broken voice; "and I am so happy! I received your fond letter——Ah! and I have such good news for you——"

Then she suddenly stopped short, as she observed the tall young gentleman who was standing near.

"Louisa, my dear sister," said Clara, taking her hand and leading her towards him,—"this is Sir Valentine Malvern, whom I mentioned in my letter. Although until this moment a stranger to you, yet when you learn the secret which I am come thus abruptly to breathe in your ears, you will receive him not merely with the kindest welcome, but with such feelings as a sister may experience towards a brother!"

"O Clara! what mean you?" asked Louisa, bewildered by her sister's words, and wondering whether they had already expressed her actual meaning in that allusion to sister and brother. "Our dear aunt was strangely affected when speaking of the late Sir Archibald Malvern——"

"Louisa—our aunt—speaking?" echoed Clara, now in her turn contemplating her sister with the wildest astonishment.

"Yes, dear Clara, it is indeed all true," said the young maiden. "Last night our beloved aunt was released most miraculously—most providentially—from the spell of unconsciousness——"

"Oh! what do I hear?" exclaimed Clara, flinging upon Louisa a strange look of mingled incredulity and terror. "Our aunt restored to consciousness? Ah! Valentine," she observed, abruptly turning towards the baronet, "how can I ever look that beloved relative in the face and tell her everything that has happened?"

"Clara, Clara!" almost shrieked forth Louisa: "what is it that you say? Recall those dreadful words which have struck terror to my heart! Oh, you cannot have done wrong! No, no—it is impossible!"

At this instant the door of the parlour was thrown open; and Mrs. Owen, accompanied by Lilian—having darted down stairs on hearing that half-scream from Louisa's lips—rushed into the room.

"Heavens! Lady Sackville!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen, in a voice of thrilling surprise.

"Lady Sackville!" echoed Louisa wildly: then fixing her eyes for a moment upon her sister, she shrieked forth, "O God, I understand it all!"—and sank down senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER CXC.

THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST.

Here we must interrupt the regular course of our narrative to chronicle certain events necessary to the elucidation of the mysteries belonging to the past.

Some four-and-twenty years previous to the period of which we have been writing, there was a family consisting of four sisters, named Halkin, residing at a short distance from the cathedral-city of Rochester. Their Christian names were Lydia, Anne, Melissa, and Lilian. They had been left orphans at a somewhat early age, with a moderate income derived from an annuity purchased in the stock of some public company. Lydia, the eldest, was the only one of the four that had no claim to the possession of beauty: but in compensation for this absence of personal charms she possessed an amiable heart, an excellent disposition, and the purest principles of rectitude and virtue. Her three sisters—Anne, Melissa, and Lilian—were endowed with a rare loveliness; but on the other hand they were wanting in sound moral stamina. They had been well educated and genteelly brought up; and their accomplishments as well as their polished breeding qualified them all to move in the best society. The extraordinary beauty of Anne, Melissa, and Lilian, might also have justified them in the hope of forming good matrimonial alliances; but the giddy flirtations into which they were led with some young officers in garrison at Chatham (which town joins Rochester) materially damaged their character for prudence and propriety, and not only caused them to be spoken lightly of by many of their acquaintances, but also to be excluded from the parties given by those families whom they had been accustomed to visit. Lydia, the eldest sister, beheld these results with anguish and foreboding, and earnestly remonstrated against the thoughtless course which Anne, Melissa, and even the young Lilian (then only fifteen) had pursued. But they treated her well-meant advice with the most unbecoming levity, and affected to regard the opinion of the world with extreme indifference.

The consequences were precisely those which might have been anticipated. The three giddy girls—more thoughtless than positively depraved, and not yet unchaste—were in their hearts sadly mortified at being actually *cut* by their former friends, and finding that their respectability was gone. The transition from this state of feeling to that of recklessness was easy and rapid. Anne, the eldest of the three foolish young women, began to reason with herself that she was now past twenty—that all her prospects of forming a good marriage were blasted—and that any change in her condition could scarcely be of a very flattering nature. That is to say, she might become a tradesman's wife, or the mistress of a gentleman. The former proposal was submitted to her by a shopkeeper who was too much enamoured of her beauty to think deeply of her damaged reputation; and the latter offer was made to her by a gentleman named Owen, who was staying in Rochester at the time, and was much smitten with her charms. Mr. Owen was not very well off; but he was remarkably handsome, and was related to the Leveson family: he was likewise most impassioned in his suit. Anne was glowing and voluptuous in temperament; and she accordingly fled from her home and accepted the protection of Mr. Owen.

This was a sad blow for the pure-minded and virtuous Lydia: but Melissa and Lilian openly declared that they thought their sister Anne had acted quite right. Lydia remonstrated with them, observing that with such ideas in their minds, they themselves were preparing the way for their own ruin; and in her heart she deeply feared that Anne's example outweighed in its evil effects the good influences of her own advice and conduct. Soon after Anne's elopement with Mr. Owen, a young gentleman, passing by the name of *Beckford*—exceedingly handsome, and not more than twenty-two or twenty-three years of age—came to pass a few weeks at Rochester. He lived in the most quiet manner, brought no letters of introduction with him to any of the families in the city or neighbourhood, and did not appear to seek acquaintances. Yet he was evidently well off; for he was attended by his valet and groom—had a couple of horses—and passed the greater portion of his time in riding about the country. During one of these equestrian jaunts he fell in with Melissa, as she was rambling out alone. We will not pause to say upon what pretext he addressed her: suffice it to observe, that being smitten with her beauty, he did address her—and she displayed but little prudery on being accosted by so handsome a young man. Before he well knew who she was, or that she belonged to a family not over celebrated for prudence or propriety, and one member of which had already eloped with a paramour, he fell so deeply in love with Melissa that he offered her marriage. This proposal she was by no means likely to reject—especially as she herself reciprocated that passion with an equal degree of fervour. They were accustomed to meet in the secluded walks and lanes in the vicinage of the cathedral-city; and as Mr. Beckford (as he called himself) knew no one in those parts to tell him anything about the Halkin family—and indeed, as he kept this little love-affair entirely to himself—he continued wooing with every appearance of honourable intention, where in reality he might *at first* have achieved a conquest upon much easier terms.

We have said that Melissa soon learnt to love him fondly: and this was the case. She adored him with all an impassioned woman's glowing affection; and she soon began to contemplate with pride and hopefulness the time when she was to become his wife. So vehement were his protestations of honourable intentions, that in the midst of this glow of passion she still retained her chastity; and by thus repelling such advances as he made to possess her, she confirmed his belief that she was a young lady who must be wooed as a wife to be won at all. Thus went on this love-affair for some months; and at length Mr. Beckford told her that the reasons which had compelled him to remain in seclusion at Rochester had ceased to exist. Indeed it was a Chancery suit in which he had been engaged, which in its multifarious ramifications had threatened him with arrest for what is termed "contempt of court;" but the fault in the proceedings having been amended, the suit terminated in his favour, putting him in possession of some property.

Such was the tale he told; and it was the true one. But he did not add, as he ought to have done, that the name of Beckford was a fictitious one, which he had temporarily assumed the better to avoid the inimical process of the Chancery Court.

He was now, then, about to leave Rochester;

and he told some story as a reason for wishing that his marriage with Melissa should take place under circumstances of the strictest privacy. No matter now what the story might have been: it was one of those which false gallants under such circumstances have but little difficulty in devising; and so specious was it, that Melissa believed it. She communicated the circumstances to her sisters Lydia and Lilian. The former was at once suspicious, and recommended searching inquiries: the latter, naturally credulous to a degree, supported all Melissa's hopes and arguments that everything was straightforward. Even Lydia herself was somewhat if not entirely disarmed of her misgivings, when Mr. Beckford was duly introduced at the house and proposed that the marriage should take place there, but under circumstances of great privacy. This was agreed to,—Mr. Beckford undertaking to obtain the special license and bring the clergyman with him at the appointed hour. All these arrangements were duly carried out. Mr. Beckford came punctually to the moment with a post-chaise, and accompanied by the reverend gentleman who was to perform the ceremony. The special license was also produced—Lydia and Lilian acted as bridemaids—the rites were solemnized—and the happy Melissa was saluted by her sisters as *Mrs. Beckford.* She and her husband then entered the post-chaise, and were whirled away to London.

On arriving in the metropolis, Melissa was introduced to a handsome house in a beautiful suburban region; and there was she installed as its mistress. But in a few days Mr. Beckford urged the motives which he had before given on behalf of the private marriage, as the reasons why he could not dwell altogether with her for the present. "He had a very particular and self-willed old father to conciliate, who would cut him off with a shilling if he knew of this marriage."

Melissa, loving devotedly, and not wishing to see her husband frustrated in what he represented as his "brilliant prospects," consented to all the arrangements he suggested; and he accordingly seldom spent the night at the house, although scarcely a day passed without his calling and staying several hours with her. Such was the influence he obtained over Melissa that he persuaded her to keep these circumstances secret from her sisters at Rochester when she wrote to them: and she did so. In due course the birth of a daughter, whom she christened Clara, gave her the occupations of a mother, and thus agreeably filled up the intervals when Mr. Beckford was absent.

Here we must interrupt that portion of the narrative which regards Melissa, in order to speak of Lilian. This beautiful but by no means steady-minded young creature remained with her sister Lydia at the dwelling near Rochester; and she also fell in with a handsome young gentleman who became enamoured of her charms. This admirer was named Bernard Audley: he was connected with the aristocracy, had been educated at Cambridge, and was shortly to be ordained for the Church. Lilian stood more than her other sisters had done in terror of Lydia; and Lydia herself, feeling a sort of maternal responsibility towards Lilian, who was the youngest, kept as jealous a watch as possible over the young damsel. Nevertheless Lilian contrived to meet her lover in secret. He offered marriage, and she believed: but having less command over her passions than Melissa, she had not the moral strength to resist the overtures of Bernard Audley, and her virtue was accordingly surrendered to his keeping. He devised a well-concocted tale to account for his delay in making her his own—alleging that he was scarcely yet of age, entirely dependent upon his friends, and picturing naught but ruin for himself and utter poverty for both if he at present made Lilian his wife. The credulous girl believed implicitly all he told her: but when she found herself in a way to become a mother, she grew earnest in her entreaties that he would espouse her at any risk. Still he procrastinated the fulfilment of his solemn promise; and Lilian's situation grew day by day less tolerable and more desperate.

At length her sister Lydia began to suspect that something was wrong—though she was very far from conjecturing that matters were so bad as they really were. She had a serious conversation with Lilian; and the latter, in her utter despair, displayed a spirit which led to some little altercation. To fly into a passion and assume a proud and independent bearing, was the last resource of a young woman taken to task by an elder sister and dreading to be taxed with what was really the truth. It was not therefore the kind-hearted Lydia's fault that this quarrel took place: she said and did everything conciliatory—but though all the while displaying so rebellious a spirit, Lilian had not the real courage to throw herself into Lydia's arms and reveal the truth. At her next interview with Bernard Audley she gave way to her feelings to such an extent that he grew frightened; and when she besought him to take her away with him to some distant part, even if he could not make her his wife at the moment, he yielded to her demand. She fled with him—and Lydia, the eldest sister, was now left alone in her cheerless and forsaken abode. She would have followed Lilian, but could obtain no clue concerning her. She went to London and communicated the sad intelligence to Melissa, who was much affected. She likewise found out where her sister Anne was living with Mr. Owen; and to her also did she tell the tale. But Mrs. Owen (as she was styled) treated it with characteristic lightness, saying that she had no doubt Lilian had consulted her own happiness in the course she had adopted. Poor Lydia, well nigh broken-hearted, returned to her forlorn dwelling near Rochester, to brood over her sorrows in secrecy and solitude.

Meanwhile Lilian had fled away with Bernard Audley. They were but mere girl and boy, neither of them being twenty-one at the time. The young man had a tolerable allowance from his parents: but he was naturally extravagant as well as heartless and unprincipled; and his passion for Lilian soon cooling, he found her a burthen. They travelled about from one fashionable watering-place to another, until the time arrived for Lilian to become a mother: and then she gave birth to a male child. Scarcely was she recovered from her confinement, when her unscrupulous seducer proposed without much circumlocution that they should make away with their innocent offspring, as it was a sore burthen upon them! She could scarcely believe her ears; and when he saw that she regarded him with indescribable horror, he affected to turn it off by declaring that he did but say so in jest and in order to try her. Shortly afterwards he abandoned her suddenly, leaving her utterly penniless, and in debt at the lodging where they had been staying. Her anguish exceeded all powers of description—delirium fastened upon her brain—and in a paroxysm of frenzy, when utterly irresponsible for her actions, the unhappy creature but too faithfully followed out the accursed hint which she had received, and which was doubtless uppermost in her wildering thoughts at the time. She laid violent hands upon her child; and when the awful deed was done, her reason awoke to a full sense of its stupendous atrocity. She was arrested and conveyed to prison: but as she and Bernard Audley had been living under an assumed name, the statement, when first appearing in the newspapers, afforded her sisters no clue to the fact that *she* was the guilty infanticide, even if that statement met their eyes at all. When Lilian's trial however took place, her real name and that of her seducer transpired. She was acquitted of the charge, not precisely upon the ground of her delirious irresponsibility at the moment, but through some flaw in the indictment, and which was detected by the ingenuity of the counsel whom the sheriffs provided for her. She was accordingly set free without even a sentence of imprisonment: but still she went forth from her gaol with the brand of the murderess upon her brow!

When Lydia read in a newspaper the account of this trial, which account *did* happen to meet her eyes, she was at first overwhelmed with affliction: but summoning all her courage to her aid, she sped post-haste to the Assize-town where Lilian had gone through the fearful ordeal before the tribunal of justice. On arriving there, all she could learn was that the unhappy young woman, on being discharged, had instantaneously quitted the place, and no one knew what had become of her. Lydia accordingly returned to her cheerless home—now

more cheerless than ever, because in her solitary hours she had the companionship of the most distracting thoughts. She likewise, poor creature! was destined to prove the truth of the old adage that misfortunes never come alone; for soon after the incident just related, the public company whence her income was derived stopped payment, and speedily closed its transactions in bankruptcy, affording little better than a mere nominal dividend. Forthwith to Melissa (or Mrs. Beckford, as she was called) did Lydia hie to make known this fresh calamity—a calamity which left her altogether denuded of resources. Melissa was however on the verge of confinement with her second child; and therefore Lydia, instead of obtruding her own sorrows upon her sister, remained to soothe and console her during the period of woman's painful ordeal. Another daughter was born, and was named Louisa.

But it was during the month following Melissa's accouchement that a fearful discovery was made, and most indiscreetly, as well as even abruptly, communicated to the invalid lady through the imprudence of the monthly nurse. This woman, who was intemperate in her habits, had nevertheless obtained considerable patronage amongst many of the ladies at the West End of London; and it so happened that she had attended on a certain Lady Malvern, the wife of Sir Archibald Malvern, a young baronet of considerable property but of somewhat dissipated character, who resided in Hanover Square. When Mr. Beckford called on Melissa, this monthly nurse at once recognised him as Sir Archibald Malvern! But he did not take any particular notice of *her*. His own son had been born about two years previous to the incident of which we are speaking: this interval had therefore elapsed since he had seen the nurse, and it was by no means probable that a gay, dashing, and thoughtless gentleman of the West End would recollect the countenance of an old woman. She, however, as just stated, knew him full well; and though she did not immediately betray the secret, nevertheless she retained it not thus sacred very long. Indeed, little more than a fortnight had elapsed since Melissa gave birth to Louisa, when the old nurse, under the influence of spirituous liquor, let slip the fatal truth all in a moment; and Melissa, excited and agonized to a degree, at once saw in a hundred circumstances its dire confirmation.

Lydia was with her unhappy sister at the time, and vainly endeavoured to soothe and console her. Shortly afterwards the self-styled Mr. Beckford himself arrived at the house; and entering the room without previous announcement, according to his wont, was at once accused by the almost frantic Melissa of the treachery he had practised towards her. It was impossible to deny the charge; and his conduct indeed was all the less pardonable inasmuch as from what the nurse had stated, he must actually have been married at the time when the Chancery suit had compelled him to retire for a season to Rochester, and when he was therefore courting Melissa. Falling upon his knees, he confessed everything—passionately pleading the infatuation of his love as the only excuse he could offer for his treacherous conduct. His marriage indeed with Melissa had been a mere mockery: for though a special license was really obtained, as any one upon payment of certain fees can procure such a document, yet the individual who had acted as the clergyman on the occasion was an unprincipled profligate fellow—a broken down gentleman, in short—whom Sir Archibald Malvern had bribed to become an accomplice in the solemn but perfidious farce!

Such was the confession which the baronet made to the deceived Melissa, and in the hearing of the sorrowful but likewise indignant Lydia. To do him justice, he was overwhelmed with grief and stricken with remorse: for in truth he loved Melissa well, although in the selfishness and the heartlessness of that love he had made her his victim. He implored her forgiveness—vowing that he would ever continue his attentions towards herself, and a paternal care in respect to the children; and he besought that for his own sake and for that of his wife an exposure might be avoided. And Melissa *did* forgive him! Yes—so ardent and sincere was her love, that she granted him her pardon. But in her weak and enfeebled condition at the time, the blow was more than she could endure; and despite all the attentions of the eminent physicians whom Sir Archibald Malvern in his anguish and alarm summoned to attend upon her, she failed rapidly, and in a few days ceased to exist.

When the funeral was over, Lydia composed her half-distracted feelings as well as she was able in order to have a serious conversation and come to a solemn understanding with Sir Archibald Malvern relative to a future provision for the motherless children whose care now devolved upon herself. The Baronet at once desired her to specify the arrangements which she was anxious for him to make. Her future plans were already settled: and her notions in pecuniary matters were limited and economical. Nevertheless, her own sources of income having utterly failed through the bankruptcy of the public company, she found herself altogether dependent upon Sir Archibald Malvern. She therefore stipulated for an income of 120*l.* a year, with which she undertook to bring up the two children in a decent and respectable manner. To these terms Sir Archibald Malvern at once assented; but in order to guard against the possibility of the affair ever coming to the knowledge of his wife, he proposed that in drawing upon him periodically for the amounts due, it should be in the name of *Beckford*. To this Lydia could offer no possible objection; and the understanding was therefore finally settled between them. Lydia then explained to the Baronet the plan she had formed. She could not bear the idea of bringing up her nieces with the stigma of illegitimacy upon them, or that they should ever have to blush when in after years speaking of their parents. Moreover, as the family to which she belonged had in so many ways disgraced itself, and the name of *Halkin* was one which she could no longer bear in the world with pride and honour, though she herself had never tarnished it,—yet she resolved to renounce it and take another. Besides, it was consistent with the notions she had formed relative to the bringing up of her two motherless nieces that they should never learn the profligacies of their two aunts Anne and Lilian; and therefore it was desirable that the name of Halkin should at no time be identified with their growing impressions.

It was for all these reasons that Lydia took the name of *Stanley*—broke up her home at Rochester—and removed with her two infant charges to the retired and secluded cottage at Canterbury. For the same reasons also was it that as Clara and Louisa grew up, they were given to understand that their father was an officer in the army who had been killed in the Flemish wars, and that the shock produced by the sad intelligence had sent their mother to an early grave.

Before however Lydia Halkin quitted London after Melissa's death, she found out her sister Anne, who was living with Mr. Owen, by whom she already had two children—Agatha and Emma: and to her did she communicate the lamentable tragedy relative to Melissa. Mrs. Owen was deeply affected at the intelligence; but Lydia, faithful to the plans which she had laid down,—and intent upon secluding herself henceforth entirely from the world, for the sake of the two children left solely dependent upon her,—gave Mrs. Owen not the least insight into her future intentions nor made the slightest allusion to her intended change of name and removal to some other part of the country. Therefore, when all those arrangements were carried out, and Lydia with the pseudonym of *Miss Stanley* took up her abode at the retired cottage near Canterbury, in company with her two orphan nieces, Mrs. Owen altogether lost sight of her.

We should observe that to account for the girls bearing her own name—that of *Stanley*—their aunt represented herself, *not* as their deceased mother's, but as their father's sister. We may likewise remark that by dint of the utmost frugality she was enabled to give them as good an education as the best day-school for young ladies in Canterbury could afford; and as she herself was well versed in all branches of polite education and in many accomplishments, the instructions she was enabled to impart were immensely beneficial to her nieces. Nevertheless, as they grew up, Miss Stanley could not help occasionally noticing with an inward misgiving and even presentiment that Clara's disposition was not altogether so radically good as that of Louisa; but that the former was naturally of indolent habits, somewhat selfish and egotistical, with a tinge of duplicity: whereas Louisa's character was a compound of all the amenities, excellences, and amiabilities that can possibly combine to consolidate the principles of virtue and form a safeguard for woman's innocence and purity.

CHAPTER CXCI.

CONTINUATION OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST.

Years elapsed—and as the reader will remember, it was when Clara was nineteen and Louisa was seventeen, that their aunt was stricken with paralysis, losing both speech and reason, and though living on, yet unconscious of all external objects and even of her own existence. Some months passed—and when the two sisters found their funds exhausted, Louisa called upon the Canterbury banker, and ascertained from him that Miss Stanley, the aunt, had been accustomed to draw half yearly for sixty pounds upon a certain Mr. Beckford who resided in London. The banker at Louisa's request, wrote a letter to Mr. Beckford, at No. 20, Hanover Square. During the long lapse of years which had intervened since Melissa's death, Sir Archibald Malvern had regularly received and honoured Miss Stanley's draughts. He had however bribed the postman never to deliver at his house any letters addressed to *Mr. Beckford*, but to leave them at a certain shop at the West End, where Sir Archibald dealt, and where he was wont to call at such times that the letters from Canterbury were likely to arrive. Upon receiving in this way the Canterbury banker's communication, he wrote, in the name of *Beckford*, to express his sorrow at Miss Stanley's illness and announce that thenceforth the joint draught of the two nieces would be duly honoured for the same half-yearly sum as heretofore. Lady Malvern was then still alive, and exceedingly jealous as well as suspicious: hence the maintenance of all these precautionary arrangements connected with the name of *Beckford*. Indeed, to guard the more completely against the discovery of his youthful amour and the treacheries that had characterized it, Sir Archibald was not wont to honour the draughts through his own regular banker, but through the London agent of the Canterbury bank.

It was very shortly after he had written the letter just referred to, in reply to the Canterbury banker's communication, that Lady Malvern died, after a very brief illness; and although the same reasons now no longer existed for maintaining all the precautions so long persevered in, Sir Archibald nevertheless made no change in the plan of transmitting the money, simply because it was a convenient one and had grown habitual. Eighteen months more passed; and in the month of June, 1814, he himself met his death in the bath-room at the Blackheath villa, while engaged in his intrigue with Lady Ernestina Dysart. As a matter of course the next bill, sent by Clara and Louisa to London through the Canterbury bank, was returned unpaid; and the letters of advice addressed as usual to Mr. Beckford, remained unnoticed. They lay at the tradesman's shop where the postman was wont to deliver them; and the tradesman himself, not dreaming of the horrible catastrophe in which Sir Archibald's life had closed, kept them in the hope that he would call for them. The Canterbury banker wrote to his London agent to make inquiries: but the latter could learn nothing; and by some oversight neglected to inform his Canterbury correspondent with the fruitless result of his inquiries. Then was it that, failing to obtain any satisfactory intelligence from London, the two young ladies held a long deliberation together, the result of which was Clara's memorable journey to the metropolis. On arriving in London, in the middle of July, 1814, Clara at once proceeded to No. 20, Hanover-square; and to her astonishment she learnt that no such person as Mr. Beckford resided at the mansion—that he was not even known there—nor indeed did any person of that name dwell in the neighbourhood. Of course the name of Sir Archibald Malvern was altogether strange and unknown to Clara; and she was alike bewildered and dismayed. She asked to see Mr. Valentine; but from him she obtained no satisfactory information. Nevertheless, though so deeply

absorbed in his own sorrows, arising from the then very recent and mysterious disappearance of Sir Archibald, he was inspired—not with a feeling of love and admiration for the beautiful girl—but with a sentiment of profound compassion and sympathy on her behalf. It was as if the voice of nature was whispering in some faintly-heard and unknown language in his soul, as accident thus threw him in contact with his half-sister!

From Hanover Square Clara Stanley proceeded to the London banker: but there her inquiries were equally futile. She issued from the bank in utter despair. Poverty stared her in the face—not mere poverty in the mitigated acceptance of the term, but utter destitution and gaunt beggary! Nor did she dread these hideous evils for herself alone, but on account of her loved sister Louisa and her poor helpless bed-ridden aunt. For whatever faults Clara might have possessed—and these were as yet scarcely developed—she was endowed with a generous heart; and all the images of horror which in her deep desperation were forced upon her mind, would have led her at once to make any sacrifice in order to avert the threatened ruin from herself and those she loved. Returning to Gracechurch Street to take her place by the coach for Canterbury, she was robbed in the neighbourhood of the booking-office. Her little all was now gone! Penniless in the streets of London, she had not even the means of paying the necessary deposit to secure a seat in the coach. Driven almost to madness, she hastened in pursuit of the individual whom she supposed to have robbed her. Vain attempt!—and she soon became aware of the entire hopelessness of her endeavour to catch the pickpocket in the maze of the metropolis.

Pausing in the profoundest despondency to reflect upon what course she should pursue, Clara Stanley was accosted by an elderly woman whose respectable appearance and motherly demeanour at once gained her confidence. The female questioned her relative to the mournfulness of her looks; and Clara, in her inexperience of London life, was naturally overjoyed to find herself the object of so much apparent sympathy. She therefore unhesitatingly revealed the causes of her embarrassment: and the woman, struck by her exceeding beauty as well as by her unquestionable innocence, corroborated as it was by the artlessness of her tale, offered to befriend her. Clara, full of hope and fervent gratitude, accompanied the matron-looking female; and a hackney-coach being summoned, she was taken by her new friend to a handsome establishment in a large square. Thus was it that Clara Stanley unconsciously fell into the hands of one of the vilest women in existence: for this human personification of hypocrisy was none other than Mrs. Gale—and it was to her house of fashionable resort that the innocent young lady was introduced!

Nevertheless, Mrs. Gale did not at once shock Clara's delicacy or awaken her suspicions by throwing her in contact with any frail creature who might at the moment have been in the house: but installing her in a room to herself, she at once hastened away to Albemarle Street for the purpose of driving a bargain with the Marquis of Leveson for the sale of Clara's virtue. She failed however to see the Marquis on the occasion, and was returning to Soho Square when she bethought herself of a certain commission which she had received some time previously from a lady of fashion at the West End and with whom she was acquainted. She accordingly without a moment's delay proceeded to call upon Miss Bathurst, at No. 13, Stratton Street, Piccadilly: for this was the lady alluded to. Miss Bathurst was at home, and at once gave an audience to Mrs. Gale.

"I have at length found," said the infamous woman, when closetted with Miss Bathurst, "a young lady who, if I mistake not, will exactly suit your requirements, whatever they may be. Into the nature thereof I do not pretend to inquire: but the beautiful creature whom accident has thrown in my way, will be worth at least a couple of hundred guineas to me from the Marquis of Leveson or some other fashionable patron; and if you like to give me that sum this phœnix of perfection shall be placed in your hands for you to model her to suit your own purposes. She exactly answers all the points in the description you gave of what you wanted when you first entrusted me with the commission to obtain such a person. That she is innocence itself and of unblemished chastity, there can be no doubt. When you hear her artless tale from her own lips, as I have heard it, you will be of the same opinion. As for her beauty, I do not exaggerate when I pronounce it to be not only of the highest order, but likewise of the most voluptuous style, combined with a sufficient degree of intellectuality to redeem it from mere brute sensuousness. She has not a single fault. Tall in stature, inclined to be stout, and with a magnificent development of the bust, her figure is yet characterised by elegance and grace. She says that she is only twenty-one, and she may be believed: but she looks two or three years older. Her teeth and eyes are incomparable: her complexion is of dazzling whiteness, but with a rich bloom upon the cheeks. The auburn of her hair is the richest that ever I beheld; and the outline of her features is classic. Her manners, though tinged with rustic bashfulness, are nevertheless lady-like and prepossessing, and require but the smallest amount of proper tutoring to render them elegant. Altogether she answers the description you gave me some time ago."

Miss Bathurst was overjoyed, and immediately concluded a bargain with Mrs. Gale, who hastened back to Soho Square, and with some ready excuse for the proceeding, took Clara Stanley at once to Stratton Street,—so that the young lady issued from the vile woman's house not only as pure as she had entered it, but likewise without entertaining the remotest suspicion of the den of infamy where she had thus passed two hours on this memorable day.

It was still early in the afternoon when Clara was thus introduced to Miss Bathurst; and Mrs. Gale was at once dismissed with the stipulated sum in her pocket. Miss Bathurst has already been described to the reader as a lady midway between forty and fifty, retaining the traces of great beauty; and as her manners were elegant, her address fascinating, and her hypocrisy consummate, she was at once enabled to make a very favourable impression upon Clara. The young lady repeated to her new friend all that she had previously told Mrs. Gale; and in a short half-hour

Miss Bathurst was fully acquainted with every point and particular of Clara's history so far as the fair narratrix was herself acquainted with it.

"Now," said Miss Bathurst, "you are a young lady of intelligence and of a strong mind; and you are for the instant in a most embarrassing position. It happens that I have it in my power—at least I hope so—to place you in a career of brilliancy and splendour. So far from dreading poverty, you shall be surrounded with riches. So far from fearing that the sister and the aunt whom you love may become houseless and friendless, you shall have it in your power to maintain them in comfort and ease. Innocent though you are, you cannot be unconscious of the circumstance that you possess a loveliness of no common order; and that so far from having been formed to dwell in the seclusion of a country-cottage, you were destined to shine as a star in the brilliant circles of fashion. Will you leave yourself in my hands? will you permit me to become your preceptress? The career which I purpose to open before you, may lead to the most enviable position—perhaps enable you to form some splendid matrimonial alliance."

Clara was bewildered by all that she heard; and her brain was half-intoxicated by this sudden elevation from the depths of despondency to the pinnacle of hope. But she craved farther explanations. Miss Bathurst at once replied that she could not develop her projects all in a moment—that Clara must abandon herself to them in all confidence, and even give proofs not merely by that confidence but also by her qualifications, that she was worthy of being entrusted with the important secret of her new friend's designs. Having thus spoken, Miss Bathurst, artfully availing herself of Clara's desperate position, put it to her to decide at once. "There was no time for delay. She might refuse or accept as she chose. If she refused she must at once take her departure from the house; but when she found herself friendless and penniless in the wide streets of London, what would she do? would she not be glad to come back and accept even a far less brilliant destiny and upon much harder conditions?"

Clara grew more and more bewildered. Miss Bathurst, following up her advantage, plied every argument, delineated every golden prospect, and used all her powers of persuasion as far as she was able.

"Do not think," she said, "that I am a mere paltry intriguante or a base trafficker in female virtue. Little as you know of London, you *must* perceive that this is a fashionable street; and a glance around will show you that this is a fine house, of undoubted respectability. Here is the *Court Guide*; you perceive my name in it. Behold these cards upon the table: they are those of my visitors—and you observe amongst them some of the highest names, male and female, in the British Aristocracy. Here," continued Miss Bathurst, opening her writing-desk and placing several perfumed billets in Clara's hands, "are notes of invitation to the noblest as well as the most fashionable houses. Here is even a note from the Prince Regent, written by his own hand and accompanying that beautiful vase you see upon the cheffonier and which he sent me as a present. You observe that he writes to me as '*Dear Miss Bathurst*'—a distinguished honour only conferred on the favourites of that select circle which visits at Carlton House. Here is another note from his Royal Highness to my nephew, Mr. Horace Sackville, inviting him to dinner at the Palace. See, the Prince addresses him '*Dear Horace*,' and concludes with '*Your Affectionate Friend*.' But I need give you no further proofs of my own high position. It is now for you to judge whether you will put implicit faith in me. In this case you must make up your mind to remain in London: you cannot return home. An excuse for your absence can easily be made to your sister Louisa; and your aunt is placed by her affliction beyond all possibility of inquiring after you. Moreover, your letter to Louisa can enclose this Bank-note for a hundred pounds, which will serve to corroborate whatever tale we may devise to account for your stay in London."

Clara hesitated no longer. Was it likely that she would do so? Bewildered by all she heard and all she saw—convinced by the many proofs placed before her of Miss Bathurst's social position and high standing in society—and also perceiving the real tangible means of shielding her beloved sister and afflicted aunt from the menaces of poverty, the young lady blindly abandoned herself to her new friend's care, counsels, and tutorings, and at once signified her assent. It was yet time to save that day's post, and it was most necessary to do so, inasmuch as Louisa would be anxiously looking out on the following morning for a letter. Accordingly, Miss Bathurst's ingenuity at once suggested that Clara Stanley should pretend to have found the Mr. Beckford whom she had come up to London to seek, and that this person, whether real or imaginary, should at all events be made the alleged source of that bounty which the letter was to contain and likewise the cause of Clara's detention in the metropolis. The young lady accordingly wrote to Miss Bathurst's dictation, her own ideas being very far from sufficiently collected to enable her to undertake the spontaneous authorship of such a letter. The reader will recollect that this letter was given in full in one of the earliest chapters of our tale. The summary of its contents was to the effect that Clara had found Mr. Beckford, who was a kind-hearted, amiable, and excellent old gentleman—that it was entirely through a mistake, which he had explained, that the last cheque upon him was not honoured—that he had desired a bank-note for a hundred pounds to be at once forwarded to Canterbury—that Mrs. Beckford had insisted upon keeping Clara in London for a few weeks—and that the Beckfords had removed their residence from No. 20, Hanover Square, to No. 13, Stratton Street, to which latter direction Louisa must send her reply.

Such was the letter that Clara penned according to Miss Bathurst's dictation; and when it was sent off to the post and beyond recall, the young lady felt she had taken her first lesson in the school of duplicity. She therefore found it impossible to retreat even if she were inclined. But she was *not*: for this new existence upon which she had entered, speedily developed numerous and increasing charms for a young woman of Clara's disposition. The very next morning Miss Bathurst took her in

a carriage to see Acacia Cottage at Knightsbridge; and as Clara was much pleased with the dwelling itself and its beautiful situation, the carriage whirled away at once to the house-agent who had the letting of it. But while proceeding thither Miss Bathurst said, "That beautiful cottage is to become your home so soon as it can be got ready. You must abandon your present name and take a new one, so as to destroy all identity between the future tenant of that house and the humble Clara Stanley from a secluded habitation in some corner of Kent. You must take a name at once aristocratic and fascinating. Let me think! When the tutorings to which you are to be subjected, shall have given the requisite polished gloss to your manners, you will know how to mingle dignity with elegance, and your beauty will be at once splendid, queenly, and dazzling. And at this moment, all that I have just said reminds me of a description I was reading this morning of the proud beauty of Venice, the Queen of the Adriatic. Now then, the idea is excellent! your christian name shall be *Venetia*. It is an uncommon name, and at once gives the idea of a charming, elegant, and graceful woman. Well then, you are Venetia instead of Clara. But now for a surname! What think you of *Montgomery*? No, that is too long. *Plantagenet*? No: that would really appear to be assumed. *Trelawney*? Yes: an excellent name! Venetia Trelawney! Now my dear friend, I have the infinitive pleasure of shaking hands with the elegant Miss Venetia Trelawney."

Thus speaking, Miss Bathurst suited the action to the word and took the hand of the astonished and bewildered Clara Stanley, who as a matter of course had no objection to offer to the proposed substitution of nomenclature, seeing, as she did, that it formed a part of Miss Bathurst's still mysterious and unfathomable project. By the time this arrangement was made, and *Clara Stanley* had become in a few minutes transformed into *Venetia Trelawney*, the carriage stopped at the house-agent's. There a bargain was at once made: Miss Bathurst haggled not at terms, but paid the requisite premium for the lease, which she ordered to be made out in the name of Venetia Trelawney; so that our heroine all in a moment found herself the lessee of Acacia cottage. Then the carriage whirled away once more; and this time it was to an upholsterer's. The immense warehouses of splendid furniture were inspected by the two ladies; and Miss Bathurst was delighted to find that her young companion developed much excellent taste, notwithstanding the secluded life she had led, in expressing her opinion relative to the mode of furnishing the several rooms at Acacia Cottage. The upholsterer received orders to have the cottage furnished throughout within twenty-four hours. Five hundred pounds were paid in advance, with the intimation that the balance should be forthcoming on the completion of the order; and the receipt was made out in the name of Venetia Trelawney.

From the upholsterer's the carriage proceeded to a silversmith's hard by; and there a select quantity of plate was chosen,—Miss Bathurst still consulting Venetia Trelawney's taste and finding it to be really excellent. The bill was paid, the receipt being, as on the former occasion, made out in the name of Miss Trelawney; and the goods were ordered to be sent on the morrow to Acacia Cottage. From the silversmith's Miss Bathurst and Venetia proceeded to a fashionable jeweller's in Bond Street; and there our heroine was presented with a beautiful watch and chain, some rings, a set of pearls, and various other articles amounting altogether to more than a hundred guineas, for which Miss Bathurst's apparently inexhaustible purse furnished the amount — and again was the receipt made out in the name of Miss Trelawney. From the jeweller's the carriage proceeded to Miss Bathurst's attorney—she having, as she alleged, a few instructions to give that gentleman; but during her interview with him Venetia was left in the carriage, and therefore she knew not what the nature of the business was. Nor indeed did she devote a thought to the circumstance: for the strange rapidity of the incidents through which she was being whirled, as in a dream of fairy-land, kept her brain in a state of pleasurable excitement and blissful bewilderment.

From the lawyer's the carriage proceeded to a fashionable mercer's; and there large purchases were made. Morning and evening dresses—dresses likewise for walking and for the carriage—and every requisite of a fashionable lady's toilet, were chosen in no niggard manner and paid for without hesitation, the receipt being still made out in the name of Miss Trelawney. Thence away to Long Acre, where dwelt an eminent carriage-builder; and here a beautiful barouche in the newest fashion, and of the lightest and most elegant style, was purchased. But as Miss Bathurst was no judge of horses, but could put the utmost confidence in the carriage-builder, who had received her patronage for years, he was empowered to procure a pair with the least possible delay, so that the equipage might be sent complete to Acacia Cottage in forty-eight hours. The acknowledgment for the amount paid on this occasion was, as heretofore, made out to the credit of Miss Trelawney.

The greater portion of the day was thus occupied; and when Miss Bathurst and Venetia returned to Stratton Street, it was time to think of dinner. Our heroine was now introduced to two ladies who had come to stay with Miss Bathurst. One was Mrs. Arbuthnot, whom Miss Bathurst introduced to Venetia as her future companion, inasmuch as it would be imprudent and might provoke the tongue of scandal were she to dwell alone at her future residence of Acacia Cottage. The other lady was Mrs. Fitzherbert — formerly the mistress of the Prince Regent, but who had for many years altogether ceased even from seeing him. She was upwards of sixty, but still retained the traces of an extraordinary beauty, and preserved a fine *embonpoint*, into which the once voluptuous grandeur of her charms had expanded. Venetia did not then know that Mrs. Fitzherbert had been so intimately connected with the Prince: for she was utterly unversed in all the rumours and scandals of Court life. But Mrs. Fitzherbert treated Venetia with a kind of affectionate attention, and also surveyed her with the deepest interest; and when dinner was over she and Miss Bathurst placed Venetia between them on the sofa, and not merely began to give her what might be termed lectures upon the manners of high life and the etiquette of the best so-

ciety, but also gently and delicately, as well as with much apparent kindness, mentioned to her any little faults they had noticed in her deportment at the dinner-table. These were vey few indeed, and were rather little awkwardnesses than positive solecisms in good-breeding—and Venetia, who possessed a rare appreciation as well as an extraordinary intuitive quickness on such points, at once profited by the hints and suggestions thrown out. Thus the evening passed away; and our heroine retired to her chamber well wearied with the bustle and excitement of the day. Scarcely therefore was her head laid upon the pillow, when she fell asleep, and thus had no time for thought.

The whole of the next day was passed in-doors. Milliners and dress-makers were in attendance; and to these auxiliaries of the toilet did she have to devote some time. About noon Miss Bathurst's lawyer was announced; and that lady, taking Venetia aside, addressed her in the following manner:—

"My dear girl, you saw yesterday the immense outlay which I made on your account, and which, when the rest of the bills are paid, will have absorbed more than two thousand guineas. Now, I mean to be very frank with you. You suddenly find yourself a comparatively rich woman: for you have a splendidly furnished house, a beautiful equipage, plate, jewellery, a varied and costly wardrobe, and everthing necessary to commence housekeeping in the handsomest style. But this is not all. Here is a banker's book; and you will find, if you open it, that a thousand guineas have been paid in to your account. All this shows you that nothing has been done by halves; and at the same time you can form an idea of the enormous amount expended in setting afoot my plan. Well as I think of you, my dear Venetia, yet you must nevertheless remember you are a total stranger to me; and I am about to place unlimited confidence in you. At starting therefore, I make it a purely business-matter; and my lawyer has prepared a bond, which you will sign, and which makes you my debtor to the extent of three thousand guineas. Of course I shall never expect payment *direct* from you: but this bond will enable me to re-enter into possession of all the property wherewith I am entrusting you, if at any time you should endeavour to deceive me. It is a mere precaution; and as you doubtless mean fair-play, there can be no harm in your signing it. My lawyer is waiting in another room; and when you have gone through this little formality, I will give you full and complete explanations of the whole project which I have in hand, and for the carrying out of which your assistance is engaged."

Venetia made no objection; and accompanying Miss Bathurst to the dining-room where the attorney was seated, she signed the bond. The lawyer took his leave; and when he was gone Miss Bathurst proceeded to address Venetia in the following manner:—

"Start not, my dear Venetia, when I inform you that some years ago I was upon terms of the closest intimacy with the Prince Regent. In fact I was his mistress. But our connexion came to an end; and with it ceased all the influence which for the time it gave me. Mrs. Fitzherbert was likewise for some years on the same footing with his Royal Highness. No—not exactly on the same footing: for whereas I was only secretly and privately his mistress, she was openly and publicly acknowledged as such. Her influence during the period of her connexion with his Royal Highness was far greater than mine; and the loss of it, when that connexion ceased, has even been more profoundly felt by that lady. A complete rupture has for the last twenty years existed between herself and the Prince: but as you have seen by the letters from his Royal Highness, which I have shown you, he still now and then deigns to think of *me*. Were I to ask a favour of him, however, I should experience a refusal, or else a cold neglect which I do not choose to draw down upon myself. Now, you must know that both Mrs. Fitzherbert and myself have reason to regret our total loss of influence at Court: for we have numerous relations and friends for whom we wish to provide in the various departments of the civil and military services. For a long time past we have taken counsel together, in order to devise some scheme to regain, though indirectly and through the medium of *another*, at least some portion of our lost interest with the Prince Regent. After varied deliberations we resolved upon a certain scheme, all the points and bearings of which we duly discussed, so as to mature our plan and render it ripe for execution whenever we should find the fitting agent for carrying it out. I accordingly gave instructions to a certain Mrs. Gale—a shrewd, deep-seeing, and active woman—to procure for me a young lady of matchless beauty, elegant manners, fashionable appearance, and strong mind. It was no ordinary being that was thus sought after. There are plenty of beauties about the Court already; and therefore for our purpose it needed one whose loveliness should transcend anything which ever came within the sphere of the Prince's view. Months have passed since I gave that delicate but important commission to Mrs. Gale: but at length she has succeeded in the discovery of the perfect creature so necessary to the success of these plans. Mrs. Gale is the woman whom you encountered the day before yesterday in Gracechurch Street; and you are this phœnix of perfection."

Here Miss Bathurst paused for a few moments, while the colour gradually mantled upon Venetia's countenance: for the young lady now began to comprehend her destiny. As a matter of course her mind was not sufficiently depraved to receive these explanations, so significant in their tendency, without a partial shock: but this effect of her better feelings was speedily triumphed over and subdued by the sense of gratified vanity, as well as by the certainty of present riches and splendour, and with the prospect of ascending to the most brilliant position. Miss Bathurst, who watched her with the keen searching eye of a thorough woman of the world, read what was passing in her soul, and speedily saw that Venetia was her own.

"To-morrow," she continued, "you will go and take up your residence at Acacia Cottage; and in a very few days the whole West End of London will be ringing with the intelligence of a most lovely but mysterious star suddenly appearing in the galaxy of London life. The very mystery which will hang around you, cannot fail to give an enormous impulse to the excitement and the sensation

THE FOUR MISSES HALKIN IN THEIR YOUTH.

you are to create. No one will know who you are or whence you come. There will be no clue to your parentage, your connexions, or your friends. People will hear that you have honourably paid for everything in fitting up your establishment, and that you are well off: they will, therefore see that you are no mere adventuress. Mrs. Arbuthnot—a prudent, far-sighted, and matronly-looking woman—will be your companion, living with you altogether, riding out with you in your carriage, and accompanying you in your walks; and therefore the breath of scandal cannot injure your fair fame. Thus far all circumstances will be propitious to you at the outset; and from that starting-point everything will depend upon yourself. You will have the dissipated members of the nobility seeking your acquaintance: but you must repulse them all. Hauteur to one—coldness to another—mocking disdain to a third—indignation to a fourth—and so on. Away with them all! Then you will receive tender billets beseeching interviews, making overtures of love—some in their infatuation proposing marriage—others offering to settle large sums upon you as an inducement to become their mistress. But every letter must either be returned to its writer, or else treated with stern silence. By these means you will obtain a reputation for a virtue as inaccessible as your charms are brilliant. In a few weeks the whole West End will be talking of you. But in the meantime you will have much to do. For a month to come you must every day practise music and drawing. You already possess a good elementary knowledge of these arts. Mrs. Arbuthnot, who is proficient in both, will speedily render you proficient also: for you must become eminently accomplished, as well as having the recommendations of personal loveliness and the strictest chastity. Then, too, you must read all the fashionable literature of the day: a large assortment of books ne-

cessary for these polite studies will presently go down to Acacia Cottage. Fashionable novels must form the principal portion of your reading, so that you may speedily catch an idea of the frivolities and the thousand-and-one elegant nothings which may be said to make up the sum of a fashionable existence. In these readings you will be assisted by Mrs. Arbuthnot; and you must never hesitate to ask her for explanations when you find yourself at fault. You must likewise read *Peerages* and accounts of the Aristocracy, as well as the fashionable newspapers and the Court journals, so that you may obtain an insight into the histories and the proceedings of all the first families: for you know not how largely such matters enter into the conversation of high life. You possess an excellent memory: and whatever you study you will retain. You have also a quick intellect, and will speedily appreciate all the salient points in these subjects for your study. With your quickness and natural shrewdness—with your powerful mind and expansive genius—you will in a very few weeks complete what may be termed your fashionable education. But still this is not *all*. You must study before your mirror as well as in books and journals. You must practise the airs, the looks, and the demeanours which are to be adopted to suit all occasions and likewise all emergencies. You must tutor that beautiful face of your's to seem disdainful at one moment, and softly winning at another: you must make those lovely eyes of your's flash fire at will, or droop into an expression of languor more softly sensuous than is even their natural wont: and you must apply the same plastic art to your coral lips, so that they may wreath in smiles, curl with scorn, or be compressed with an air of subdued indignation. You must likewise study your attitudes, and practise movements and gestures: and in all this, do not forget that a large portion of your self-teachings is in preparation for the time when you will have to play the artillery of your charms upon that heart against which they are ultimately to be directed. Mrs. Arbuthnot will tell you how the whitest and most beautifully rounded arm may be set off to the best advantage by a particular gesture or attitude; how the finest, the whitest, and the most voluptuous bosom may be likewise displayed by a particular position; or how the daintiest feet and ankles can be shown by particular movements, the possessor all the time appearing unconscious of the circumstance. I do but glance hurriedly over these details. Mrs. Arbuthnot will go farther into them with you; and in her will you find a proficient as well as willing and patient instructress."

Again Miss Bathurst paused, but rather to gather breath than to ascertain how Venetia received all she said: for the satisfaction of the young lady was depicted in her countenance, Venetia being well pleased with the part which she had thus to play and the routine chalked out for her to pursue.

"As a matter of course," resumed Miss Bathurst, you will form no friendships and receive no guests, without previously consulting me: but as it will be better that your acquaintance with me should be kept as secret as possible, you must come but seldom to Stratton Street, and then only of an evening—as Mrs. Arbuthnot can be the means of constant communication between us. And now let me continue my explanations relative to the hoped-for results of all these preliminary arrangements. I have already said that you will soon become the topic of universal conversation throughout the fashionable world; and in proportion to your coldness and reserve towards all who seek your acquaintance, will grow the general anxiety to form it. The name of Venetia Trelawney will be in the mouth of every one; and when you ride in the Park you will be the cynosure of general observation. The greatest ladies in the land will be mad with jealousy; because they will hear their husbands, lovers, and acquaintances all talking and thinking of nothing but Venetia Trelawney. You will become a favourite toast at dinner parties and at the clubs: the fashionable newspapers will have paragraphs concerning you: your dress will give hints for the fashions—milliners and dress-makers will quote your good taste—and thus will the name of Venetia Trelawney become a perfect *furor* and rage. In due course the Prince Regent will hear of you. My nephew Horace Sackville, who is intimate at the palace, will not fail to drop hints and allusions to pique the Prince's curiosity. You shall be introduced to Horace in a day or two: but he will not, when conversing with the Prince or elsewhere concerning you, let it be known that he has the honour of your acquaintance. And by the by, talking of Horace, I shall not mention to him how I became acquainted with you," added Miss Bathurst: for she did not wish her nephew to know that she had any knowledge or such a character as Mrs. Gale. "Nor indeed," she continued, "must Horace visit you at Acacia Cottage. Nothing, in short, must be done in the shape of imprudence or indiscretion in any way calculated to betray the fact that I am at the bottom of all this. For if the real truth were to transpire, the Prince, who is uncommonly keen, would at once see through the whole design, and our purpose would be defeated. Well, my dear Venetia, you must now fully understand what I mean," added Miss Bathurst: "or if you wish, I will be explicit to the end. And perhaps this course is the best. In plain terms then, you are destined to become the mistress of the Prince Regent!"

The deepest crimson now mantled upon Venetia's cheeks; but delight also beamed in her looks, joy dancing exultant in her sunny eyes, and her bosom heaving with a long sigh of pleasure. If the still small voice of conscience, whispering for a moment, touched a chord which vibrated to her heart and sent up that carnation glow to her cheeks, this voice was nevertheless almost instantaneously hushed by the louder tones in which ambition spoke in that same heart, and the thrilling pæans of triumph which resounded through her soul.

"Yes—you are destined to become the mistress of the Prince Regent," proceeded Miss Bathurst: "and no matter what remonstrance rigid virtue may offer or cold prudery may suggest, it is a brilliant and an enviable position. I say *enviable*, for there is not a titled beauty in the sphere of Aristocracy that will not be madly jealous of you: and to be jealous, is to envy! You will be courted and fawned upon even by those who will hate you most; and of the male sex you will become the idol, the goddess, the divinity. Now, mark me well! If with all the opportunities thus afforded, you play your cards judiciously and with tac

you cannot fail of success. When the curiosity of the Prince is sufficiently piqued concerning you, he will devise some means to seek your acquaintance: perhaps he will call upon you without any formal introduction at all. So much the better: you will then have him in your power, and may stipulate your own conditions. If he falls madly in love, as he assuredly will, you can obtain anything at his hands, even to becoming a Peeress in your own right. But we will not waste time in all these conjectures: the main point is for you to follow the career in which you will be placed and the advice which will be given you; and it is inevitable that the whole plot will succeed. It *must* succeed! But mind, one false step will ruin everything—one single act of imprudence will mar all. It is only by achieving the extraordinary popularity I have described, that you will be talked of in the Prince's hearing, and then will Horace be enabled to serve us by still farther piquing his curiosity. But if you yield to the overtures of any other individual—if you suffer yourself to be dazzled by any offers that may be made to you—if, in a word, you compromise your reputation and thus gain the character of an adventuress or an intriguante—you will fail to inspire that curiosity and sustain that prolonged excitement and sensation which can alone lead to success. And if successful, Venetia, only think of the advantages to be gained! They are incalculable. Your own position will of course be brilliant; and then must you labour on behalf of those who will have been instrumental in raising you to this summit of grandeur. For remember, it is I and Mrs. Fitzherbert who together have advanced these large sums of money to carry out our design: it is we who have rescued you from poverty and destitution—your sister and your aunt also—and are now placing you on the high road to fortune, rank, and influence. Therefore, when that position shall have been secured to yourself, you must exert your power with the Prince to provide pensions and places for those whom I and Mrs. Fitzherbert may point out; and through you shall we thus regain some portion of our departed influence. Now, Venetia, my explanations are complete. I do not ask you whether you have the capacity and the qualifications to enter upon a career where tact, judgment, delicacy, and shrewdness are as necessary as personal beauty itself; because in these respects I already know you to be well-fitted for the purpose. But I *do* ask you whether, after all you have heard, you can enter heart and soul upon the enterprise and give yourself up to it with enthusiasm and devotion?"

With but little compunction, and with a pleasurable sensation infinitely outweighing it, Venetia replied in the affirmative; and her destiny was thus fixed.

CHAPTER CXCII.

CONCLUSION OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST.

Behold Venetia now installed at Acacia Cottage, and entering upon the routine which Miss Bathurst had chalked out and the pursuits which she had so elaborately detailed. Mrs. Arbuthnot became ostensibly her companion: but she in reality served also as Miss Bathurst's spy, so as to watch all Venetia's actions and make her report accordingly in Stratton Street. But our heroine proved too faithful to the cause in which she had embarked and to the important interests staked upon the enterprise, to commit any error or be led into any fault that needed reporting. Indeed she proved an apt and docile pupil, not merely because she would not risk the agreeable position in which she was placed, but likewise because she had now her own ambition to gratify.

An experienced, wily, and astute lady's-maid, in the person of Miss Jessica, had been found for Venetia; and as this abigail was thoroughly trustworthy and unsurpassingly discreet, she was well fitted for the service she had to perform. The man-servant chosen for Venetia's household, was severe and morose enough to daunt any impertinent questioner, and at the same time old and ugly enough to avert the possibility of scandal on his account: for inasmuch as ladies of rank, fashion, and beauty full often convert their handsome footmen into lovers, a similar imputation might have been raised against Venetia, had her male dependant been young, of good figure, and of prepossessing countenance. Every arrangement was thus made and every precaution taken by Miss Bathurst, not only to retain a complete hold upon Venetia, but likewise to guard her reputation against the chance of calumny.

Our heroine's studies progressed most rapidly. All her habitual indolence seemed shaken off, and Mrs. Arbuthnot found her most assiduous as well as most intelligent in the various branches which she had been enjoined to cultivate. For Venetia, as above stated, not only had her ambition to gratify, but also to expel disagreeable thoughts; and hence her unwearied application to her music, her drawing, the books that had been provided for her, and her studies in all the fashionable refinements of demeanour, attitude, and manner. We have already described her as possessing a vigorous intellect and the keenest appreciation of all that was necessary for her to learn in order to play with proficiency the grand part entrusted to her; and it can therefore be no matter of surprise if in the comparatively short space of a couple of months she should have undergone the completest transformation from the inexperienced Clara Stanley of a humble dwelling at Canterbury into the brilliant Venetia Trelawney of Acacia Cottage.

When occasionally visiting Miss Bathurst of an evening, Venetia met Horace Sackville. And here we may as well observe that this young man was the illegitimate son of Miss Bathurst: but the Prince Regent was *not* his father. Indeed this fact his Royal Highness knew full well: for it is to be hoped for the honour of humanity that if it had been otherwise—that is to say, if Horace were really the Prince's son—the Prince never would have intrigued with his own son's wife. Horace's father was another person with whom Miss Bathurst had been intimate in her time: but the young man himself had never been suffered to learn the exact particulars of his birth. He had been all along taught to believe that he was an orphan, indebted to the bounty of *his aunt* Miss Bathurst; and as he grew up he had not chosen to ask many questions upon the subject. The

liking that the Prince took to him was merely one of the royal whims and caprices; and as Horace had many natural good qualities, and never took an improper advantage of the Prince's favour, he did not forfeit it. From all that has transpired throughout our long tale relative to the character of Horace Sackville, it will be seen that he was endowed with all the necessary qualifications to render him an amiable, worthy, and even high-minded young man, had not his good principles been warped and the best feelings of his nature spoilt by the contaminating dissipations and profligacies of the sphere into which he was thrown.

From the very first moment that Horace Sackville beheld Venetia, he was struck with her transcending loveliness; and indeed, he at once conceived a profound attachment towards her. This he however veiled to the utmost of his power, because Miss Bathurst had duly initiated him in the purpose for which Venetia was destined; although the little circumstance relative to Mrs. Gale was carefully kept out of sight. Horace was too much accustomed to follow the instructions and obey the wishes of *his aunt*—as he called her—not to enter at once into the plans which she and Mrs. Fitzherbert had so artfully devised: but he could not prevent himself from loving Venetia secretly and tenderly; and the more he saw of her the deeper grew his affection. Still he continued to keep this passion to himself; and faithful to the positive instructions he received from Miss Bathurst, he forbore from calling at Acacia Cottage, or even hinting to any of his friends that he had the honour of Miss Trelawney's acquaintance.

Everything that Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert had foreseen in arranging their plans, actually took place. Venetia Trelawney soon excited an immense sensation at the West End. All the noble roués and fashionable rakes were soon busied in making inquiries concerning her, and endeavouring to obtain an introduction. But all they could learn was that she had suddenly taken Acacia Cottage, fitted it up splendidly, and paid honourably as well as liberally for everything. Of course Miss Bathurst had enjoined her upholsterer, jeweller, carriage-builder, and other tradesmen to maintain the strictest secrecy relative to her acquaintance with Miss Trelawney, under the penalty of losing the said Miss Trelawney's future custom; and these injunctions were very faithfully adhered to. Thus, nothing could be learnt relative to Venetia's antecedents: no one knew who she was, or whence she came;—yet no one dared to assert that she was an adventuress or an intriguante. If this suspicion arose for a moment, it was very soon set at rest by her own conduct. Never did she appear in public without her duenna-like companion, Mrs. Arbuthnot: it was found impossible to obtain access to her; and the numerous billets which she received were either returned in blank envelopes, or else treated with cold silence. So infatuated became many very wealthy but very silly personages, that they at once wrote to offer her marriage: these were the letters which she sent back. Other epistles, making less honourable overtures, were those that obtained no notice whatsoever. All these circumstances got abroad, thus stamping her to be as virtuous as she was incomprehensible. No one could accuse her of endeavouring to thrust herself into good society, because she shunned all those who might have introduced her to the very *elite* of fashion. Thus the *furor* she excited fully equalled, if not transcended, all the most sanguine expectations of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert. Meanwhile Horace Sackville was prudently and cautiously helping on the affair. It was he who had dexterously spread the tale relative to Venetia's refusing the dazzling overtures of a certain Duke; and he had likewise on two or three occasions thrown out a hint concerning her to the Prince Regent.

Thus did the first two months of Venetia Trelawney's residence at Acacia Cottage pass away; and then occurred the memorable "Banquet of Six" at the Marquis of Leveson's House in Albemarle Street. On that occasion Venetia Trelawney's name was brought up: but Horace Sackville suffered the other guests to lavish their encomia upon her marvellous beauty ere he volunteered a word. Then, on being directly appealed to by the Prince, he said all he could to pique his Royal Highness's curiosity to the fullest extreme—artfully insinuating that if any one could possibly win her upon any terms at all, it could be none other than the Prince himself. If the reader will refer to that chapter in which the Banquet of Six is described, he will find how skilfully Horace Sackville played his part upon the occasion—and at the same time how narrowly he watched the Prince's countenance, not merely to observe the impression made by all that was passing, but likewise to make sure that he himself did not go too far and thus excite suspicion as to his covert motive. We need not recapitulate all the details of those circumstances under which the memorable love-campaign was agreed upon and the six thousand guineas clubbed to become the reward of the successful aspirant to Venetia's favours.

As a matter of course, everything that thus took place was duly made known to Venetia on the following day; and she received her instructions from Miss Bathurst, through Mrs. Arbuthnot, how to act. It was now decided that she should permit herself to become accessible to her suitors, so that by discouraging those whose turns preceded that of the Prince her conduct might the more effectually pique his curiosity and rivet his interest. Thus on the Monday, which was the first day of the love-campaign, when she beheld the Earl of Curzon in the Park, evidently trusting to the chapter of accidents to furnish him with some means of obtaining access to her, she purposely let her parrot loose to afford him the wished-for opportunity. He was not slow in availing himself of it; and then Venetia had an occasion of playing off upon him all the artillery of those airs of haughty indignation, proud defiance, and cold contempt which she had been practising for more than two months. It was a pleasure for Venetia to humble the self-sufficient nobleman who dared hope to vanquish her who was destined for a far loftier position: and she *did* humble him. Then, as he went away, her peals of silver laughter proclaimed her triumph.

The next day was the turn of Sir Douglas Huntingdon; and as Venetia had heard his character from Horace Sackville, to the effect that he was a good-natured, generous-hearted, off-hand, though dissipated young man, she was resolved to treat him very differently from the Earl of Curzon. Moreover, as he actually went and gave a very consider-

able sum in the purchase of Acacia Cottage and other houses—the whole being saleable only as one lot—and this on purpose to obtain a pretext for calling upon her, she felt somewhat flattered by the compliment thus implied; and therefore when he appeared in her presence, she treated him with the most affable display of good temper. This amiable humour was encouraged on her part by his own conduct; for, as the reader will recollect, he frankly, and we might almost say bluntly, offered her marriage. She had therefore no reason—as indeed she had no desire—to be offended with him: she even took a sort of liking to him, and treated him with a good-natured raillery, which disarmed him of all possible resentment on account of the refusal which his proposition received.

Relative to Colonel Malpas, whose turn came next, Venetia had received a very different character indeed; and she learnt from Horace that he was a thoroughly unprincipled, bad young man. She wished to have an opportunity of settling all his pretensions at once; and as he was intimate with Lady Wenlock, between whom and Mrs. Arbuthnot a long-standing friendship existed, it was easy to have a hint conveyed through that lady to the Colonel that Venetia was to be present at the entertainment given by her at Kew. There did Venetia accordingly meet the Colonel: but she certainly was not prepared for the detestable menaces to which the unprincipled scoundrel had recourse;—and had it not been for the circumstance of Captain Tash being an ear-witness of all that took place, her reputation might have subsequently suffered by the daring assertion of triumph eventually made by the Colonel.

Before we continue our explanations relative to the love-campaign of the party of six, we must pause to notice another little incident the date of which properly causes it to require allusion here. We mean the visit which Jocelyn Loftus paid our heroine at No. 13, Stratton Street. Miss Bathurst had given all her servants the requisite instructions what to say in case any one should call and inquire for a Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, or a Miss Clara Stanley. The answer was invariably to be, "that they were out of town, but were shortly expected home." This was the response which Jocelyn received, when, provided with Louisa's letter of introduction, he called on the Wednesday in Stratton Street; and returning next day, he was duly introduced into the handsome drawing-room, where he found Clara Stanley. The reader will remember that they were well pleased with each other: for the young lady assumed the most artless, amiable, and unaffected manner, so that she appeared everything that Jocelyn could have expected in his beloved Louisa's elder sister. On the other hand, the good opinion she had previously conceived from Louisa's letters respecting Loftus, and also from the references she had taken concerning him, was fully corroborated by his looks, his manner, and his discourse. She had learnt from his banker that he was a young man of good family, with an income of six hundred a-year, and still greater expectations: therefore she had from the first highly approved of his suit in respect to Louisa. Now, as above stated, a personal acquaintance ratified all the favourable impressions previously made on her mind; and she rejoiced unfeignedly that her beloved sister should have won the heart of so excellent a young gentleman. She excused herself for not introducing him to Mr. and Mrs. Beckford on the ground that they were very old people and much fatigued with their excursion into the country on the preceding day; and as Loftus, being but little acquainted with the personages and circumstances of fashionable life, entertained not the remotest idea that he was in the house of a Miss Bathurst, as a matter of course he beheld naught to engender suspicion that any duplicity was being practised. But, Ah! when he had taken his departure, how quickly did the long pent-up feelings in our heroine's bosom seek an issue in a flood of tears; and how convulsive were the sobs that her surcharged breast gave forth!

But Venetia had no leisure for thus abandoning herself to her grief, or to the flood of memories relative to her sister and her home, which this interview had so painfully excited. For it was now past noon; and she must get back to Acacia Cottage. Because this was Thursday, the fourth day of the love campaign—the grandest and most important of all! It was the day, in short, for the Prince's visit: for that he would avail himself of his turn to call upon her at once, there was but little doubt. The reader may remember with what admirable tact she played her cards upon this occasion. She gave him to understand that she was no mere adventuress—no wanton—but as yet a pure virgin: and this was the truth. She however frankly confessed that she had her ambition; and she alluded to the connexion between Mrs. Fitzherbert and himself as illustrative of the position which she must stipulate for, if she became his mistress. Then the Prince suggested that she should get married to some easy good-natured person who would either wink at her being the royal mistress, or else positively assent to it. This proposition was fraught with exceeding pleasure for Venetia, inasmuch as she saw that matrimony might be made a sufficient cloak to preserve her reputation, and also (as she hoped) to save her well-beloved Louisa the pain of ever having to blush for her sister. She had for some time observed the affection which Horace Sackville entertained towards her; and therefore the instant the Prince Regent's proposition was made, it struck her that Horace was the convenient husband to be thus obtained. She knew that his infatuation with regard to her was immense; and though she was no stranger to his natural good qualities, yet she was equally well aware that these had been too much warped and spoilt to be suggestive of any very powerful scruples against a marriage under such circumstances. As to the consent of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert to this marriage, she had little doubt of obtaining it; inasmuch as the main point was that she should become the Prince Regent's mistress—no matter by what means, so long as the aim was successfully and speedily reached.

The reader will remember that ere the Prince parted from her on that occasion, he extracted from her a promise that she would visit him at Carlton House on the ensuing evening; and she was to be at Hyde Park Corner at nine o'clock, where his carriage was to meet her. But previous to all this,—previous indeed to calling upon her at all, and therefore while still unaware of the extraordinary beauty of Venetia, as well as being under the infatuation of the lady in the gossamer

dress, the Prince had made a compact to abandon his chance to the Marquis of Leveson. Now however, having become an eye-witness of the truth of all the reports that had reached him concerning Venetia's charms, his Royal Highness repented of his bargain with the Marquis; and hastening to visit him, induced his lordship to forego the compact on condition of receiving the vacant Garter. The Prince however quite forgot, when returning to Carlton House, to confer the appointment: the Marquis thought he was tricked; and on the Friday evening, it being his turn to pursue the love-campaign, he treacherously inveigled Venetia to his mansion. She however escaped his clutches; but upon proceeding to Carlton House, she would not abandon herself on this occasion to the Prince, fearing that she had not as yet a sufficiently strong hold upon him and that too easy a surrender would damp his ardour with respect to her.

Venetia did not at once communicate to Miss Bathurst, through Mrs. Arbuthnot, the arrangement which had been made with the Prince about her getting married—she merely intimated that they had come to terms and that she was to be his mistress. She was resolved to wait and see whether Sackville himself would make any tender avowal to her; in which case she would be spared the somewhat unfeminine task of initiating overtures to him. Besides, she did not wish him to come ready tutored by Miss Bathurst how to act: but she was desirous of assuring herself that Horace would of his own accord accept her as a wife. She felt assured that, inasmuch as he had been dragged into the transaction of the Party of Six, he would avail himself of his turn to call upon her at the Cottage, with or without his aunt's consent. She therefore expected him: nor did she expect in vain. Horace called; and although the conversation began with the observation on his part, "that he was the only one who could not plead the suit of love," they nevertheless very soon found themselves deep in a discourse of a tender character. As we have already stated, the passion which Sackville entertained for Venetia amounted to a frenzied infatuation which made him reckless of any terms or conditions which might be attached to such an alliance: and therefore, though knowing everything—aware that she was to become the mistress of the Prince, and that she was far too deeply involved in the ramifications of the plot, as well as too securely in Miss Bathurst's power, to think of retreating—he enthusiastically agreed to become her husband. Then, on the whole arrangement with the Prince and with Sackville relative to this matrimonial project being made known to Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert, they cheerfully gave their assent. Indeed, closely connected as Horace was to the former, an additional guarantee for Venetia's continued thraldom to her will, seemed to be afforded by such a marriage.

Here we need not dwell upon the details of what followed. The reader is well aware how Venetia married Horace Sackville—how he was raised to the peerage—and how they took up their abode at Carlton House. The next incident which requires explanation, refers to that occasion when the Prince gave a dinner-party, at which the Sackvilles, the Earl of Curzon, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and the Marquis of Leveson were present, and when Venetia overheard a certain conversation between the Marquis and his Royal Highness. It will be remembered that the Marquis had just returned from Paris; and startling indeed for Venetia were the circumstances which he and the Prince on that occasion hurriedly discussed. She learnt, in the first place, who Jocelyn Loftus really was; and the revelation immediately accounted to her for a certain mysteriousness which she observed in the manner of his London banker when some months previously she had called upon that gentleman to take references concerning her sister's suitor. Nevertheless, the discovery now made as to who Jocelyn really was, rendered her more satisfied than ever in respect to his projected alliance with Louisa. But, in the second place, she ascertained from what passed between the Marquis and the Prince, that Loftus was a prisoner at the Prefecture of Police in Paris—that he had been assailed by extraordinary temptations, of which the profligate Miss Owens were made the agents—but that he had passed immaculate through the ordeal. In the third place, Venetia discovered that Louisa had been inveigled away from home—that she had been to Paris—that the Marquis had brought her back—and that she was at that very moment at his mansion in Albemarle Street. Lastly, our heroine overheard Lord Leveson go on to state "that Louisa had got a sister somewhere in London, but that there was evidently a mistake relative to the accurate address of this sister's abode."

On hearing these things, Venetia could not altogether restrain the feelings of mingled terror, indignation, and alarm which they were but too well calculated to excite in her bosom. Indeed, as the reader will recollect, she upset her wine-glass in her agitation; and precipitately quitting the room, hastened to her boudoir. There she gave unrestrained vent to her affliction: but seeing the absolute necessity of acting with a promptitude that should avert the threatened storm from breaking over her own head, she at once despatched Jessica to Miss Bathurst to put that lady on her guard relative to the inquiries which were certain to be made in Stratton Street concerning Miss Clara Stanley. Having taken this precaution, she made up her mind how to act in other respects; and confident of wielding immense power over the Earl of Curzon and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, she resolved to enlist their aid in carrying out the twofold purpose she had in view. One object was to rescue her sister from the clutches of the Marquis of Leveson; and the other was to effect the liberation of Jocelyn Loftus from the Prefecture of Police in Paris.

But in the carrying out of both these aims, the utmost tact, prudence, and judgment were required, in order to avoid compromising herself. In the former case she saw that it was almost certain that the Marquis of Leveson, being himself intimately acquainted with Miss Bathurst, would insist upon full explanations as to all Louisa had told him relative to her sister residing at No. 13, Stratton Street, with persons of the name of Beckford: or else Louisa herself might discover that Clara was not there, nor any such beings as the Beckfords in existence. Therefore, in entrusting Sir Douglas Huntingdon with the delicate task of rescuing Louisa from Leveson House, Venetia was compelled to take him entirely into her confidence. To

secure him however altogether in her interest, and more effectually to put the seal of secrecy upon his lips, she made up her mind to bestow upon him those favours for which he languished; and in coming to this resolve, she also yielded somewhat to her own inclinations—for the barriers of virtue being completely broken down, it needed but a small impulse thus to urge her on to the gratification of the sensuous passion she had conceived for the Baronet. As the reader however will recollect, she accidentally gave Lord Curzon the note intended for Sir Douglas Huntingdon; so that the nobleman, availing himself of an invitation which he thought was meant for him, was the first to revel in her arms.

This circumstance she did not altogether regret; because, in the first place, Huntingdon proved well satisfied to serve her faithfully and effectually upon the mere *promise* of a crowning reward; while, in the second place, it was equally necessary to secure the secret devotedness of Curzon in carrying out her object with regard to Loftus. Indeed, the management of this latter affair required as much fidelity as courage. From Louisa's letters, Venetia had learnt all that Mary Owen had told her relative to the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales: and from those letters likewise had Venetia ascertained the object of Jocelyn's visit to the Continent. But it was only with great risk and danger to her own position and interests, that Venetia could act in a manner hostile to the Prince Regent's views; and to espouse Jocelyn's cause *was* to adopt that hostile course. Hence the imperious necessity of sealing Curzon's lips relative to the task she entrusted to him; and consequently she regretted but little the misadventure which had at once thrown her into his arms—for she knew full well that when the service was performed in Paris, he would be sure to come back and claim that same favour as his reward.

The Earl of Curzon, flushed with the triumph he had achieved in at last winning that splendid and seductive woman, cheerfully undertook the commission entrusted to him; and engaging the services of Captain Tash and his man Robin, at once set off for Paris, where he accomplished the deliverance of Jocelyn Loftus in the manner described in an earlier part of our tale. But inasmuch as it for obvious reasons suited Venetia's purpose that Jocelyn should remain ignorant of who the authoress of this proceeding in his favour might be, and that he should obtain no clue to the eventual discovery thereof, his liberators were instructed to disguise themselves personally and also conceal their names—all of which they did.

But in the meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon was engaged in the execution of the task that Venetia had confided to *him*. We must however first observe that, as Venetia had foreseen, the Marquis of Leveson went to No. 13, Stratton Street; and seeing his old friend Miss Bathurst, told her "that a girl named Louisa Stanley was at his house, and that she persisted in declaring that her sister Clara was residing with a certain Mr. and Mrs. Beckford *there*, at the said No. 13, Stratton Street." Miss Bathurst could not conceal her dismay at this announcement: for she naturally fancied that Louisa would persevere in her inquiries after her sister—that the Marquis would aid her—and that a complete discovery and exposure would ensue. In this dilemma Miss Bathurst threw herself upon the mercy of her old friend the Marquis of Leveson, and confided to him everything—beseeching his assistance in devising some excuse to satisfy Louisa and divert her from farther inquiries relative to her sister. The Marquis, secretly overjoyed at having elicited such an important revelation, which suddenly put the brilliant Venetia (as he hoped) completely in his power, readily promised to further Miss Bathurst's views. He of course had nothing to gain by giving publicity to what he had thus discovered; but on the contrary, it was by keeping the secret that he expected to reduce the haughty Lady Sackville to submission. Reassuring Miss Bathurst as to the course he should adopt, he returned to Albemarle Street, and represented to Louisa that her sister Clara was out of town with the Beckfords for a week or ten days. Miss Bathurst immediately sent to Venetia to tell her what had occurred: but in the interval Sir Douglas Huntingdon had received our heroine's instructions to rescue Louisa at any risk, and no matter under what circumstances, from the power of the Marquis of Leveson. She had likewise desired him to take Louisa at once to Stratton Street; and thither did Venetia herself repair, to resume her character of plain and simple *Clara Stanley* once more, and await her sister's coming. We have seen how Sir Douglas arrived at Leveson House in the very nick of time to deliver the beauteous young maiden from the unprincipled old nobleman—and how in his own carriage he bore her to Stratton Street, telling her on the way that her sister Clara had unexpectedly come up to town.

We need but cast a brief retrospective glance over the meeting which then took place between the sisters. On that occasion Clara assured Louisa that her lover Jocelyn was innocent of the base things imputed to him—that he had passed scatheless through the ordeal of unparalleled temptations—and that he himself would in due time reveal what his real name was, and give satisfactory explanations for having adopted an assumed one. She likewise gave Louisa the assurance that he would shortly be free; and in every respect did she do her best to cheer and console her well-beloved sister. Venetia was then about to touch upon matters intimately concerning herself. She saw how dangerous it was to keep her sister in the dark on that head any longer, and that the time was come when she should give at least some explanations respecting her own affairs. She purported indeed to announce the important fact that she was married—that she was a Peeress—and that her husband occupied a high post in the Prince Regent's household. But suddenly the artless and innocent Louisa began to give utterance to everything that Lady Ernestina Dysart had told her relative to "a certain Venetia Trelawney, now Lady Sackville and mistress of the Prince:" so that the unhappy young woman, horrified at hearing her own history thus dwelt on so pointedly by her unsuspecting sister, could not for worlds have found courage to make the revelation a moment before resolved on. With a hastily devised apology for bidding Louisa so abrupt a farewell, and with the old standard excuse for not presenting her to the Beckfords, she lost no time in sending her off to Canterbury.

The next incident to which we must call attention, was one connected with the private theatricals that took place at Carlton House. On that occasion, be it remembered, Jocelyn Loftus—when there for the

purpose of seeking an interview with the Prince—recognized Clara Stanley in the brilliant Lady Sackville! His astonishment knew no bounds; and for Louisa's sake was he deeply, deeply grieved. Having seen the elder sister's letters from London to his beloved Louisa, he knew that this dear girl was utterly ignorant of Clara's career under the name of Venetia; and he therefore at once formed the resolve not to enlighten Louisa upon the subject on his return to Canterbury. He did not then foresee that a second visit to the Continent would be prolonged for seven months; and he thought that it would be better to wait until his return ere he made so startling a revelation to his betrothed as that her own sister and the Venetia of whom she had heard so much evil were identical. Nor did he present himself to Lady Sackville on this occasion: but he wrote her a long letter, the receipt of which affected her greatly.

The reader will remember it was on the same occasion when she found the Marquis of Leveson's pearls in her boudoir, that Jocelyn's letter came to hand. Therein he observed, in grave but what might be termed brotherly remonstrance, that she had evidently practised many deceits and strange duplicities towards her confiding sister; but that still he was not disposed to blame her too severely, as the whole tenour of her conduct proved that she not only continued to love that sister well, but had kept her aloof from her own sphere of brilliant dissipation. Jocelyn went on to say in his letter that he should not reveal to Louisa's ears, at least for the present, the discovery he had made—that it was probable he should have to leave England for a few weeks—but that on his return he should seek an interview with Lady Sackville, in order to arrange the best means of communicating the secret to Louisa. Loftus then proceeded to observe that inasmuch as Lady Sackville had learnt from her sister's letters many of the particulars respecting the fearful conspiracy then in progress against the honour, happiness, and even the life of the Princess of Wales, it was her bounden duty, possessing as she did an all-powerful influence with the Prince Regent, to do her best to awaken him to a sense of duty, and at least persuade him to forbear from direct persecution against his unfortunate wife, even if he chose to continue separated from her.

Such was the substance of the letter which Jocelyn Loftus wrote on that occasion; and Venetia felt all the latent generosity of her nature aroused on behalf of the Princess of Wales. She moreover calculated that if she could succeed, by secret and indirect means, in breaking up the conspiracy, it would be a deed to tell materially in her favour, not only in the estimation of Jocelyn Loftus, but likewise in the opinion of her sister Louisa when the day should come for making the announcement that herself and Lady Sackville were one and the same person! But for the reasons above set forth, Venetia could not possibly work otherwise than insidiously and privately against those conspirators of whom her royal lover was at the head. To be detected in espousing his wife's cause, would be to risk her position at the palace, and to be expelled in utter disgrace from the atmosphere of the Court. She therefore resolved to employ the Earl of Curzon once more; and at the same time accident again brought Malpas to her notice. On this occasion it was as a broken-down spendthrift and a ruined man that he stood before her: and much as she detested the Colonel, she nevertheless regarded him as an instrument exactly fitted for her purpose. She knew how thoroughly unprincipled he was, and that he would hesitate at nothing in order to carry out a purpose, while his necessities seemed to place him altogether at her mercy. Hence the commissions which she gave to the Earl of Curzon and to Colonel Malpas, to proceed to the Continent and by worming themselves into the favour of the profligate Miss Owens, seize any opportunities that might occur of withdrawing them from the sphere where their presence was so fraught with danger.

We have now no further explanations to give relative to Venetia's career, nor to elucidate the mysteries of her conduct on past occasions. We may however pause to observe, ere concluding this chapter, that from the moment she became the royal mistress she was enabled fully to carry out the designs of Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert. All the relatives, even to the remotest cousins, of these two ladies, were well provided for. Pensions, places, and sinecures were conferred upon some: quick promotion in the military and civil services was obtained for others. The Prince grumbled sometimes at these demands upon him; and sometimes he contented himself with merely expressing his astonishment that Venetia should use her interest almost exclusively on behalf of two families. But he never refused compliance with her requests. The last demand that she made upon him ere her visit to Canterbury, was to have Miss Bathurst's name placed upon the Pension List; and as Horace was so closely related to that lady, the prayer did not seem unnatural on Venetia's part. The Prince grumbled for a few moments, and at length yielded his consent—so that the name of Elizabeth Bathurst was speedily introduced upon the Pension List for an income of seven hundred pounds a year, "in consideration of the eminent services of her late father,"—who was a general in the army, but being a mere drawing-room soldier, had always managed to command garrisons at home and had never seen a hostile shot fired in his life!

Altogether, down to the period at which we have brought our narrative, Venetia had more than fulfilled the expectations which Miss Bathurst and Mrs. Fitzherbert formed when they devised the memorable intrigue that wafted her upon the glowing sea of fashionable life. The three thousand pounds, which those two ladies had advanced for the equipment of the charming vessel that was thus launched, had been amply repaid fifty-fold in the rich cargo which it was constantly bearing into port; and thus was the original design crowned with the most extraordinary success.

CHAPTER CXCIII.

CLARA AT HOME.

CLARA STANLEY was now at home once more! Yet she no longer bore the name of Stanley—she was the titled Lady Sackville, wife of an English Peer: and surely this humble cottage could

LOUISA AND HER LOVER.

scarcely be called *a home* for her who had been accustomed to dwell in the gilded saloons of Carlton House?

Yet when her sister Louisa was recovered from the swoon into which she had fallen on the discovery that Clara and Venetia were one and the same person,—yet, we say, did the charming and ingenuous girl pour forth ten thousand cordial welcomes for the long-absent one who had returned again. With floods of tears did Clara strain the charming girl to her bosom, while their half-brother Valentine and their two aunts Mrs. Owen and Lilian all stood by deeply affected. The mystery relative to Valentine Malvern was speedily cleared up; and the amazed Louisa, on comprehending the degree of relationship in which she stood to the young gentleman, received his fraternal embrace.

Mrs. Owen undertook the task of proceeding up-stairs to prepare the way for Clara's interview with her invalid aunt: and without entering into details, we need only say that in a few minutes Clara herself hastened to the sick room, and was received in the arms of that fond relative who had for so many years supplied to her the place of her lost mother.

In the course of the evening of this memorable day, Clara gave her three aunts her entire history, as in London, on the previous day, she had given it to Valentine Malvern—of course, suppressing all those particulars relative to the Marquis of Leveson, Colonel Malpas, the Earl of Curzon, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, which she would indeed have perished rather than reveal. Louisa was not present when Clara thus performed the painful duty of reciting her narrative to her three aunts; and it was not until the two sisters had an opportunity of being alone together in the evening—and when seated in the shady arbour in the garden—th[illegible] Louisa obtained any insight into that strange, ro-

mantic, and even wondrous career which had elevated her sister to the peerage. Nor will the reader blame Clara if she withheld as much as possible of the details that were most likely to shock the pure mind of her innocent and artless sister: nevertheless, she could *not* conceal the circumstance of her intimate connexion with the Prince Regent. Louisa's generous disposition naturally suggested as many excuses as possible for the errors into which Clara had been led; and it was in some such terms as these that the young damsel gave expression to her feelings:—

"I can picture to myself, dearest Clara, the bewilderment of horror and dismay into which you must have been thrown, when suddenly finding yourself homeless, friendless, and penniless in the streets of London: and never can I forget that you have now told me in language of the most touching pathos, how it was for the purpose of saving myself and our then paralysed and helpless relative from the direst penury, that you threw yourself at the mercy of that Miss Bathurst who made you such brilliant promises. Whatever you may have done, then, must receive no reproach from my lips. No—dearest, dearest sister, never can I reproach you. On the contrary, a veil must be drawn over all that it is unpleasant to look back upon. But tell me—Oh! tell me from your own lips—give me the solemn assurance that you will never return to the royal palace?—and then I shall be happy, truly happy!"

"Louisa, you talk to me like an angel!" exclaimed Clara, winding her arms about her sister's neck, and straining her in the fondest embrace. "When I crossed the threshold of Carlton House this morning, I solemnly vowed in the depths of my soul that I was then taking leave of that palace for ever!"

"O Clara! if you will only keep this vow," cried Louisa, "you will more than atone for the past!"

"I *will* keep it," was Lady Sackville's firm and sincere response. "I have already given our dear aunt that same assurance: and she also has forgiven me—she also has promised to overlook the past on those same terms! Whatever amount of ambition I may have once entertained has been more than gratified. I have shone in the sphere of fashion—I have been the star of courtly circles—and my soul is sated with the dissipations thereof. So far from experiencing a pang, it is with delight that I hail my emancipation from the golden chains in which my late position held me enthralled. Farewell, then, for ever to that sphere of fashion!—farewell for ever to that courtly circle! I have every reason to believe that my husband, who in sooth possesses many excellent qualities, Louisa, will likewise be well pleased to retire into the comparative seclusion of domestic life. We possess rank, and a revenue which for all our purposes may be regarded as a handsome fortune. And now too, that the past is known to my dear relatives—that I no longer harbour secrets which keep the soul in a constant tremor lest some accident should betray them—I feel happier than I have been for a long, long time past. O Louisa! is not this a day that will be ever memorable in our existence? It is on this day that your sister has been restored to you—that I have brought a brother to embrace you—and that all the mysteries of our birth being cleared up, we find that we have two other relatives in Mrs. Owen and Miss Lilian Halkin."

"Yes," observed Louisa, in a low voice full of emotion, "it is indeed a memorable day! But it will not the less prove a happy one for me, if you, dear Clara, will indeed consent to retire from the sphere of fashion and dwell henceforth in the midst of domestic enjoyments."

"And you think," whispered Clara, in a subdued and tremulous tone, "that the virtuous, the high-minded young man who is shortly coming to make you his wife, will consent to acknowledge me as his sister?"

"Oh! can you for a moment doubt it?" asked Louisa, in a tone gently reproaching Clara for even having entertained such an apprehension.

"I know he will do everything for your sake, Louisa," rejoined Lady Sackville; "and therefore, when you assure him of my good resolutions for the future, he will not only believe you, but will treat me with kindness. Oh! there is a secret that trembles upon my tongue—but I will not reveal it. No—it shall be for your lover himself to choose his own good time, and also adopt his own manner, to make you acquainted with his real name and explain wherefore he ever assumed a fictitious one."

"Yes—that is *his* secret," said Louisa; "and from *his* lips only must I receive the revelation. Besides, I experience no undue curiosity in that respect: for whatever may be his real position in life, it is he only whom I love—and if he never revealed himself to me as aught besides simple Jocelyn Loftus, that affection would sustain no diminution."

In this manner did the two young ladies remain conversing for some time, until the servant who had been despatched to the *Fountain Hotel*, returned with Mary Owen. And now was this young lady enabled to clasp Louisa in her arms and call her by the endearing name of *cousin*. Then Clara was presented to Mary Owen, also as a cousin, and they embraced: but infinite was the surprise of the young girl to hear of the identity of Louisa's sister with the brilliant Lady Sackville. Nor less was she amazed to learn that Sir Valentine Malvern was the half-brother of the two sisters! Yes—it was indeed a complete family party assembled at the cottage that evening: and although there were naturally many painful memories, yet the circle of united relatives was not without its experiences of present happiness and of hope for the future.

Clara took up her abode at the cottage in order that she might not even for a few hours be separated from her sister. Mrs. Owen, Mary, and Sir Valentine Malvern returned to the *Fountain Hotel*; and Lilian repaired to her humble lodging at the peasant's hut. On the following day Clara passed many hours in writing. She addressed a brief letter to the Prince Regent, taking an eternal adieu of him—thanking him for the many kindnesses she had received at his hands, beseeching that he would adopt no measures in the hope of recalling her to Carlton House, and concluding with the intimation that her husband would explain to him her motives for so suddenly abandoning a Court life and retiring into comparative seclusion. She next wrote a letter to Miss Bathurst, stating that the drama in which she

had played so conspicuous a part was now at an end, never to be resumed—at least by *her:* and she likewise terminated with the remark that Horace would give all requisite explanations. She then drew up a very long, earnest, and touching letter to her husband, telling him everything that had occurred—her motives for so suddenly leaving London, and her unchangeable resolve to withdraw altogether from the theatre of her former triumphs. She reminded him of the many touching scenes which had occurred between them, and which had proved at the time such chastening and salutary episodes amidst the career of dissipation and profligacy that they had been pursuing. She used every argument and called into requisition every possible appeal to persuade Horace to resign the Stewardship in the Royal Household and lose no time in joining her at Canterbury, so that they might debate upon their future plans. With reference to the debts which Horace might have contracted, she stated that Sir Valentine Malvern's liberality would ensure the speedy settlement of them all; and that indeed her half-brother had generously volunteered to become Horace's banker the moment she hinted to him the existence of such liabilities. Finally she explained the contents of the letters she had written to the Prince Regent and Miss Bathurst, leaving it to Horace to give just such explanations as he might think fit.

In penning this correspondence a large portion of the day was passed. In the evening the family party re-assembled again; and now the memories of the past were less painful, and the happiness of the present more real, while the hopes for the future seemed brighter.

On the following day Mrs. Owen and Mary said farewell and took their departure for Dover, whence they were to embark for the Continent on their way to Geneva. Valentine Malvern also said his adieus to the inmates of the cottage, and set out for London as the bearer of Lady Sackville's letters. Lilian paid but a brief visit to her sister and nieces this day, and appeared more melancholy than usual: but when affectionately questioned as to the cause, she merely observed that she felt a deep despondency of spirits, as if a presentiment of evil were weighing on her mind—and then somewhat abruptly took her departure.

Miss Stanley—for by this name did she still resolve to pass, as the resumption of her real one of Halkin would only excite disagreeable attention amongst the people of Canterbury—had so far recovered her strength that she was now enabled by the assistance of her two nieces to descend from her chamber; and supported between the magnificent Clara and the charming Louisa, she walked forth into the garden—thus breathing the fresh air of heaven for the first time after a long interval of three years!

For the present must we take leave of the cottage near Canterbury, and again direct the reader's attention to the mighty world of London: for we have yet many things to relate and many characters to dispose of ere we can bring our labours in this narrative to an end, and prepare to draw up the curtain upon some new drama for which our imagination is yet stored with so many materials.

CHAPTER CXCIV.

THE SICK-BED.

RETURN we now to the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson in Albemarle Street. The nobleman himself was awaiting with a considerable degree of anxiety the result of a consultation which those learned and excellent gentlemen, Dr. Thurston and Dr. Copperas, were holding together in the Crimson Drawing Room. The object of this consultation was the very dangerous aspect which the illness of Lady Ernestina Dysart had assumed; and the Marquis, who had always been attached to his niece, entertained the utmost apprehension on her account. Moreover, as she had been assailed by frequent fits of delirium, at which times she had said in her ravings many things that must have sounded extremely strange to the ears of the two physicians when in attendance upon her, the Marquis was not a little afraid that they might fancy those things to have a somewhat more substantial foundation than the mere fevered imagination of her ladyship: and thus did he await with a painful anxiety and suspense the result of the consultation they were now holding.

But let us peep into the Crimson Drawing Room and behold the manner in which the two physicians conducted this important deliberation. Refreshments had been placed upon the table; and while Dr. Copperas was profoundly engaged in the anatomy of a cold fowl, Dr. Thurston was as scientifically occupied with experiments upon the contents of a pigeon-pie. The Marquis's brown sherry likewise appeared to come in for its share of attention; and while thus comfortably occupied, the two physicians discoursed in the following manner.

"Well, my dear Thurston," observed Dr. Copperas, "I think you and I have played uncommonly well into each other's hands for some years past."

"And we have feathered our nests accordingly," answered Thurston. "But I very much fear that our profession, to which we are so deeply attached, is menaced by a variety of new-fangled doctrines."

"No doubt of it," replied Copperas. "We must write down all attempts at innovation. Wherever we see an individual propounding doctrines calculated to simplify the medical art and destroy its delusions, we must gibbet him unmercifully in the professional publications."

"Oh, of course!" rejoined Dr. Thurston, "Not but that the present system will last our time. We are however in honour bound to hand it down intact to the rising generation of medical men. Fees, my dear friend, are the very life and soul of our profession."

"To be sure: and so here is success to fees," said Dr. Copperas, pouring out another glass of sherry.

"And consultations too," added Thurston. "We must always recommend the propriety of consultations in any doubtful cases."

"By the by," interjected Dr. Copperas, "was it not uncommon good the other day, when the old Dowager-Countess of Catamaran cut her thumb with a pen-knife, and I persuaded her that

a consultation was absolutely necessary? I knew she was good for a fee of ten guineas each; and that she liked the solemnity and importance attendant upon a consultation. Besides, she was in a desperate fright. So I thought I would humour her——"

"Do tell me how you managed it," said Dr. Thurston, laughing.

"I will," said Dr. Copperas. "But to start from the beginning, I must tell you that her ladyship's fat footman came puffing and blowing in the greatest consternation to my house, declaring that her ladyship had met with a most serious accident, and beseeching that I would come directly. So away I went; and on arriving at Catamaran House, I found her ladyship stretched upon the sofa, with two lady's-maids bending over her—one binding a cambric handkerchief round her hand, the other bathing her head with vinegar and water—while three French poodles, instinctively feeling that something was the matter with their beloved mistress, were standing up with their fore-paws against the sofa, all whining piteously. I assumed on entering my most solemn looks; and advancing up to the sofa, asked in that low lugubrious tone which *we*, Friend Thurston, know so well how to assume at times, what was the matter? The two lady's-maids burst into tears—the Countess groaned audibly—and one of the poodles, leaping up on her, knocked the basin of vinegar and water out of the maid's hand. This little incident aggravated her ladyship's misery: but she begged and besought that the poor dear darling duck of a pet—meaning the vile ugly French poodle—might not be hurt. '*Poor dear*,' she murmured in a voice as if she were about to give up the ghost, '*it would break its little heart to be scolded*.'—Well, the liquid being wiped off her ladyship's splendid satin-dress, she said in a dying tone, '*Oh, dear Dr. Copperas! I am so glad you have come. I was mending a pen, when the knife cut a great gash in my thumb; and I am afraid that the blade was the least, least thing rusty. Tell me, dear doctor, whether you think there is any danger*.'—I shook my head gloomily, observing that it would not be proper for me, either as her ladyship's friend or professional adviser, to declare that there was no danger, but I would do my best to avert it. She said '*that, thank God, she was resigned to the worst*;' and I accordingly proceeded to examine the wound, one of the maids having with exquisite care and tenderness removed the cambric bandage. Really I had some trouble in preserving my gravity: but seeing a consultation in the perspective, I shook my head again, said something about the danger attendant on a cut from a rusty knife, and dropped a hint about the possibility of lock-jaw. The Countess groaned—her maids once more burst into tears—and the poodles whined: but I bade her ladyship and the servant-girls muster up all their fortitude, while I endeavoured to tranquillize the poodles by patting them—narrowly escaping, however, a bite from one which snapped at me. Her ladyship then asked me if I did not think she had better go to bed. I felt her pulse, looked at her tongue, and told her gravely that there was certainly fever and she had better do so—although she was really in such a good state of health that she could as easily have devoured the whole of this cold fowl as I have now eaten the two wings. Well, she went to bed; and I took my departure, having left a prescription. Of course I gave her some medicine to make her feel uncommon uneasy; and when I called again in the evening she had, as I foresaw, worried herself into a very decent state of fever. Again I prescribed and went away, leaving orders that I was to be fetched, no matter at what hour of the night, if her ladyship should feel at all worse. As a matter of course, the instructions I thus gave terrified her ladyship into a still higher state of fever; and at seven o'clock in the morning I was hurriedly fetched. Then it was I gravely recommended a consultation. The Countess asked me whom I would like to have called in? I affected to deliberate with myself; and after a brief pause said, that I did not like to recommend any particular individual in such cases, but that if there were one who more than another had specially devoted himself to the dangers attendant upon severe injuries with sharp instruments, that eminent individual was Dr. Thurston. You know the rest."

Dr. Thurston laughed with a sort of inward chuckle at this narrative; and again the two learned physicians drank a glass of sherry to the success of fees in general and their own in particular.

"And now, what about our fair patient beneath this roof?" said Dr. Copperas.

"Oh, ah," observed Thurston; "I almost forgot what we were here for. But did you notice the strange things she has uttered in her ravings—accusing herself of having conspired with the Prince Regent to send her own husband to the scaffold, and having caused the death of Sir Archibald Malvern by having him suffocated in a bath?"

"Yes: but all this was not the worst," remarked Dr. Copperas. "She talked of having been ravished by the Public Executioner——"

"I remember," rejoined Thurston. "What did you think of all that?"

"Humph!" observed Copperas. "I hardly know what to say. We are well aware that strange truths do peep forth in these ravings; and we likewise know that ladies of quality do queer things. There is doubtless some foundation for her self-accusings. For my part, I think it is clear enough she has been *rather* intimate with the Prince Regent. His name is ever uppermost in her mind. But as for the ravishing affair, that seems so utterly inconsistent—so very improbable——"

"Oh, of course!" interrupted Thurston. "But do you not think it would be as well to let the Marquis understand that we consider his niece's honour to be entirely in our keeping? It might influence the amount of fees, you know, friend Copperas."

"So it might, friend Thurston," was the response. "Now then, let us ring for the Marquis."

Thereupon the two physicians rose from the table, rang the bell, and then retreated together to one of the window-recesses, where they stood holding each other by the button-hole, assuming the most serious air, and looking for all the world as if they had merely just taken some hurried refreshment and had been the greater part of the time in earnest and profound consultation together. A servant entered; and one of them told him in a grave voice to request

the presence of the Marquis. The domestic retired; and soon afterwards Lord Leveson made his appearance. But the two doctors affected to be so deeply engaged in their consultation as not to observe his entrance; while they went on talking in the most serious manner possible—shaking their heads, and mingling such a host of technical terms with their discourse as to render it as unintelligible as the Cherokee language itself to the bewildered Marquis.

"Ah! here is his lordship," said Dr. Copperas, now pretending to observe the nobleman.

"Well, gentlemen," said Lord Leveson, "what tidings have you for me?"

Both the doctors shook their heads; and Thurston proceeded to say, "My dear Marquis, can you put confidence in the nurse and the maid who are in attendance upon Lady Ernestina?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired the nobleman, his countenance expressive of alarm and anxiety.

"Because, my dear Marquis," continued Dr. Thurston, "if there be one eminent member of the faculty who more than another has devoted himself to the study of delirium in all its phases, and who therefore is experienced in judging how far the ravings of the invalid are founded upon truth, that one is Dr. Copperas."

"I cannot consent to receive a compliment," said the amiable gentleman thus referred to, "at the expense of your own experiences, Dr. Thurston, in febrile maladies and the delirium accompanying them."

"Well, well, gentlemen," interrupted the Marquis, somewhat impatiently; "tell me what you mean. Is it that you apprehend that my niece may betray some secret matters which in her rational moments she would fain conceal?"

"To speak the truth candidly," answered Dr. Thurston, "that is precisely what we do mean. Therefore we earnestly recommend your lordship to secure the silence of the nurse and the lady's-maid. Money will do wonders in putting a seal upon the lips—will it not, Dr. Copperas?"

"It will, Dr. Thurston," replied the learned physician, with a courteous bow: for these two eminent men invariably made it a rule never to appear too intimate with each other in the presence of a third party.

"Oh! as for that," said the Marquis, scarcely able to conceal his vexation, "I can answer for the lady's-maid: she is fidelity and prudence personified. As for the nurse, I will line her pockets with gold. Of course the honour of your profession will induce *you*, gentlemen, to keep to yourselves whatever you may have heard fall from my niece's lips in her delirium?"

"Oh! as a matter of course, my dear Marquis," said Dr. Thurston.

"Beyond all doubt," added Dr. Copperas.

Lord Leveson stepped aside to one of the windows for a moment—took out a bundle of bank-notes from his pocket—selected two of a hundred pounds each—and presenting one to Dr. Thurston and the other to Dr. Copperas, he observed in a significant manner, "I rely upon your secrecy."

They renewed the assurance of strict honour in the matter, and then proceeded to inform his lordship that after a long, serious, and mature deliberation, they had come to the conclusion that Lady Ernestina Dysart was in a state of the utmost danger—that nothing but *their* unwearied attention could assist the patient in wrestling against her malady, and that they would therefore do themselves the pleasure of calling three times a day, unless sent for oftener.

When they had taken their departure, after having left a prescription, the Marquis of Leveson proceeded to the invalid's chamber. Lady Ernestina was now asleep: but the Marquis sat down by her bed-side, watching for her to awake. The nurse and lady's-maid were both in the room—the former dozing in a great arm-chair; the latter treading about on tiptoe, putting things to rights. Several bottles of medicine were upon the mantel; and there was every indication about the apartment to show that Ernestina was really very ill.

The Marquis, sitting himself down by the bed-side, gazed upon her long and mournfully. She was frightfully altered. But a few days had elapsed since, through the fearful outrages of the Hangman, she had been stretched upon that sick bed; and yet it seemed as if the ravages of years had wreaked upon her their searing, scathing, blighting ills! The natural plumpness of her flesh had yielded to haggardness of the countenance and emaciation of the person. Her cheeks were sunken and ghastly—her eyes were surrounded by a deep blue tint—her nose was thin and pointed—her lips were well nigh colourless—the splendour of the bust was disappearing rapidly. And all this was the work of a few short days!

The very room seemed to be filled with the atmosphere of death; and as the Marquis sat contemplating the wreck which his niece had become, and thought of the ruin too which she must remain, even if she recovered from this dangerous illness, certain compunctious feelings crept into his heart. For here we must observe, that having in the first instance learnt from her ravings enough to make him suspect the nature of the outrage which she had received at the hands of the Hangman, he had subsequently questioned her, when alone with her, and in one of her lucid intervals, relative to the fearful secret which seemed to weigh upon her mind. Then was it, that in the bitterest agonies of mingled grief, and horror, and self-loathing, she had confessed all to him. Now, therefore, as he sat gazing upon her, he thought that if after her husband's death upon the scaffold he had removed her to one of his country seats, and there remained to watch over her and save her from pursuing the career of profligacy on which she had then already entered, he might have averted all these evils beneath the weight of which she was now succumbing. But instead of doing that, he had allowed her to remain at Leveson House—within those walls which contained the apartments filled with pictorial and sculptured obscenities: and he had likewise encouraged her as it were, in her own depravities, by making her his accomplice in his attempt to deprive Louisa Stanley of her innocence. As he now beheld her, stretched before him with faded beauties and ruined charms—a ghastly wreck in the vigour of youthfulness—the mere shadow of the splendid being that she so lately was—his heart smote him bitterly, bitterly; and he thought that in all *this* he recognized the evidence of a superhuman retribution!

Now he wished to speak seriously with his niece: but she still slept on. For a time the fever had

left her. There was not even a trace of its tint upon her cheeks; but all was wan and ghastly there. Two hours elapsed—and still she awoke not. The Marquis's dinner-hour arrived; and he descended to the parlour where the repast was served, leaving instructions that he was to be summoned to the sick-chamber so soon as the invalid should awake.

It was not until nine o'clock in the evening that Ernestina opened her eyes. The fever had entirely left her: but she was weak almost to powerlessness. The medicine, which had been prescribed, was given her; and the nurse then sent to fetch the Marquis. When he came he desired to be left alone with the invalid: the lady's-maid and the nurse accordingly quitted the room; and placing himself by the side of the couch, he took his niece's hand, saying, "My poor Ernestina, you have been very ill—you are yet very ill."

"Yes," she answered in a low plaintive voice; "I feel as if the hand of death were upon me."

"Do not speak thus despondingly, my dear niece," said Lord Leveson. "I have come on the present occasion on purpose to see if there be anything I can do to ease your mind of whatever annoyances may be pressing upon it. I have sent the nurse and maid away from the room, in order that you may speak without reservation."

"Ah! my dear uncle," exclaimed Ernestina, her voice suddenly swelling with a degree of excitement; "*you* then entertain the fear that this is my death-bed? Yes—I see by your look that such is the case! Perhaps the physicians have told you so? And, Ah!" she continued, without waiting for his reply, "I also apprehend the worst. Would to God that I were prepared for it! I have had my omens—my warnings—aye, fearful warnings! Have I not been delirious? have I not raved? Yes—I remember that it was in those ravings I revealed the terrible secret which made you question me the other day. Oh! what must be thought by those who have overheard me?"

"Compose yourself, my dear Ernestina," said the Marquis: then, hesitating not at a falsehood in order to tranquillize her, he added, "Those who have been present at your bed-side when the delirium of fever was upon you, attach no significancy to anything you may have said. In such a state of mind invalids give utterance to the wildest and the most improbable, as well as the most monstrous things."

"Monstrous indeed!" said Ernestina, shuddering visibly. "But unhappily all the monstrosities to which I may have given utterance, were based on truth—terrible, terrible truth! Just now I said that I had received omens and warnings: and I have so. In my dreams have I beheld frightful objects. I have seen my husband draw aside the curtain and gaze upon me, with the halter round his neck, and his features all distorted with the agonies of strangulation. Ah! and how frightfully did he glare upon me with his stony eyes!—how fiendish, how diabolical was the look of malignant hate that grew upon those convulsed features! O, my God! it was terrible, terrible!"

"Ernestina, you will excite yourself," exclaimed the Marquis, "into delirium once more. Do, I beseech you, compose your feelings: tranquillize yourself—give not way to these appalling ideas."

"But they force themselves upon my mind," answered Ernestina, bitterly. "And what I have told you was not all. Not merely have I seen my husband standing by the side of the couch—there, in the very spot where you are now seated—but I have likewise beheld the dreadful man——O God! I cannot name him——whose outrage has reduced me to what I am! Ah, the agonizing sense of that outrage will be my death! It was the most hideous of pollutions!"—and the wretched lady writhed convulsively in her couch.

"Ernestina, you must change the current of your ideas," said the Marquis. "For heaven's sake, let us talk of something else."

"Wait a moment," said his niece. "This thing is uppermost in my mind: and I must speak of it. Listen then. It was one night—I do not know which, for I have not been able to keep any note of the lapse of time—but I remember full well that I awoke, and looking round, beheld the nurse sleeping in her arm-chair. The tapers were a-light on the mantle; and a solemn silence prevailed in the room, broken only by the regular breathing of the woman. I became wide awake, and was in as full possession of my intellects as I am at this moment. All of a sudden it seemed to me that I heard the door open: but I did not think anything of it, as I fancied it might be still early in the night and that the maid was coming in to see me ere retiring for good. But you may fancy the mortal terror that fastened itself upon me, when I saw the figure of a man steal in on tiptoe, stop to assure himself that the nurse was sleeping, and then creep in the same stealthy manner up to the foot of the bed. I could not cry out: I was paralysed with the stupor of consternation; for I had no difficulty in recognizing that monster in human shape who has caused me such indescribable misery. He saw my eyes fixed upon him; and as I gave not utterance to even the faintest sound, he doubtless comprehended how completely terror had stupified my senses. Oh! if I were to live a thousand years, I should not forget the diabolical expression of gratified revenge which gradually expanded over his features, making them seem ten thousand times more hideous than they naturally are. His eyes appeared to gleam like those of a snake, with a vibrating light that sent the chill of death to my heart's core. For upwards of a minute did he thus stand glaring upon me; and then leaning far over from the foot of the bed, he whispered with a sort of hissing sound, '*Am I not revenged? You would have left me to perish in that cursed chair; but thanks to your uncle's amour with Lady Sackville, I escaped! And now it is you who perish. Yes; you are dying with shame, because you have been the Hangman's mistress. Well, you will go to join your husband whom you sent through my hands to prepare your way. Don't think however that if you do live on, I shall leave you unmolested. No; in a night or two I shall come and see you again. I don't think, for your own sake, you will tell those about you that you expect such a visitor. So I have nothing to fear on that score. But you may perhaps fancy to-morrow, when you awake again, that this was a dream. Here is something to prove that it was not.*' And drawing out his great clasp knife, he thrust it through the bed-curtain. Immediately afterwards he took his departure, stealing out of the room as noiselessly as he had entered it—and I swooned away."

"Heavens! what is all this I hear?" exclaimed the Marquis, who had listened with an awful interest to the narrative. "Dares the villain persecute you thus? But no—it can have been naught save a dream."

"No, my dear uncle," answered Lady Ernestina; "it is no dream. Behold!"—and she pointed to one of the curtains at the foot of the four-post bedstead.

The Marquis, springing from his seat, hastened to inspect the drapery: and there, sure enough, was the hole—or rather slit—about half an inch long, and evidently made by a sharp knife passed through the curtain! His countenance became very pale—his lips quivered with rage—and returning to his seat by the bed-side, he said, "Yes, my dear niece, it is indeed but too evident that the miscreant has been here. Oh! what can I do to guard against farther intrusions on his part? It is clear that the ruffian defies bolts and bars, and penetrates into any house which it suits his purpose to enter. Nevertheless I will see if I cannot stop him in future. Devising some excuse for the precaution, I will presently give orders that two of the men-servants shall watch down stairs all night, with loaded pistols; and I will charge them that they unhesitatingly and mercilessly shoot down any intruder."

"Yes, if you will do this, my dear uncle," said Ernestina, "you will relieve me of the cruellest apprehensions."

"But why, my dear child," asked Lord Leveson, "did you not tell me of all this before? I would have adopted the precautions I am now about to take."

"Oh! if you only knew with what bitter repugnance I allude to that monster," said Ernestina, "you would understand why I have not before confided to you the circumstance of his visit. On the present occasion, however, some feeling for which I cannot account, has urged me to give you all these explanations, and likewise inspired me with the courage and power to do so. But ere now, my dear uncle, at the beginning of this conversation, you observed that if there were anything you could do to ease my mind it should be done. Alas, I know that I am dying—I feel that I shall never quit this couch again, except to be laid in my coffin. There is therefore one request which I have to make——"

"Name it, Ernestina—name it," cried the Marquis; "and if it be in my power to grant it, rest assured that it shall be cheerfully fulfilled."

"I could wish to see my brother Algernon before I die," said Ernestina. "Will you despatch messengers to fetch him hither with the least possible delay?"

"You know, my dear Ernestina," replied the Marquis, "that he is on the Continent. I told you some days ago all that he has been doing——"

"But if you despatch trusty envoys," interrupted the invalid, "with positive orders to travel night and day, can he not be brought back speedily? Oh! if you write but a few lines to inform him that his sister is dying, and that she implores him to come and see her, if only for a few instants ere the hand of death shall close her eyes for ever—think you that he will not hasten to obey the summons? Yes—Algernon possesses a noble and a generous heart; and he will come—I feel persuaded that he will come! Grant me this request: it is the last perhaps I shall ever make—and you cannot conceive how great would be the relief to my soul to know that Algernon had been sent for!"

"Not a moment's delay shall take place, my dear niece," replied her uncle, "ere the necessary measures are adopted:"—and thus speaking, he rang the bell.

The lady's-maid immediately answered the summons.

"Tell Brockman and John," said the Marquis, "that they are to make instantaneous preparations to start off on a journey. A post-chaise and four must be ordered at once. And having delivered this message, bring me writing materials:"—then as soon as the maid had quitted the room, he turned again towards Ernestina, saying, "I will send two of my domestics, so that when they reach France, one may take one route and one another, in case Algernon should be returning home; and thus there will be little chance of missing him. I will write two letters also, that each may be the bearer of one."

In a few minutes the maid re-appeared with the writing materials; and the Marquis of Leveson, sitting down at the table, penned the following letter:—

"ALGERNON,

"Your sister Ernestina is very, very ill; and she conjures you to lose not a moment in coming straight to Albemarle Street to see her. Whatever occupations you may have in hand must be immediately abandoned; nor must you pause on the road for any purpose whatsoever. Travel day and night, I beseech you: or you may not behold Ernestina alive.

"Your uncle,
"LEVESON.

"To the Lord Algernon Cavendish."

The Marquis made a duplicate copy of this letter; and having sealed them both, directed them, *not* with the name of Lord Algernon Cavendish, but by the assumed one which his nephew had taken. By the time the despatches were thus prepared, the lady's-maid returned again with the intimation that Brockman and John were in readiness; and the Marquis descended to the hall to give them the requisite instructions and also the funds for their journey. The post-chaise and four was in waiting; and soon after ten o'clock did the messengers take their departure.

Lord Leveson now ascended once more to his niece's chamber, whither the nurse had returned during his temporary absence: but again he dismissed both this woman and the maid for a little while, telling them he would sit for another half-hour with Lady Ernestina. Accordingly, when again alone with his niece, he said all he could think of to tranquillize her mind and cheer her spirits. Thus did the half-hour elapse; and he was about to bid her good night and summon her attendants, when the door was gently opened—and as the nobleman looked to see who was entering, he gave vent to a sudden ejaculation of mingled rage and horror on beholding the hideous countenance of the Hangman.

CHAPTER CXCV.

THE CATASTROPHE.

THAT ejaculation was immediately comprehended by Lady Ernestina Dysart; and suddenly starting up into a sitting posture in the couch, she gazed with wild staring eyes upon the advancing form of her deadliest enemy. Then slowly sinking back on the pillow, she groaned in agony of spirit.

"Monster! what do you here?" demanded Lord Leveson, confronting the Public Executioner, who had not at first observed the nobleman in the shade of the curtain.

"Ah! is it your lordship?" said Daniel Coffin coolly. "You and me are old friends——"

"Friends!" echoed the Marquis, becoming purple with indignation: "how dare you address me in such terms? But this is not the place for dispute. Come with me."

"Not till I have said a word to her ladyship," responded the Hangman with brutal gruffness.

"Do, for heaven's sake, I implore you—come!" said the Marquis. "You know that I hesitate not to pay liberally. Come, I say."

"Well, that's an inducement, at all events," observed Coffin. "Lead the way. But one word," he added, clutching the Marquis forcibly with his rough grimy hand: "don't think of making any exposure or kicking up a row; for if you do, I on my part will let out such things as shall make the whole world ring."

"Enough! spare your threats," interrupted the Marquis, in a strange deep tone. "Whatever takes place between us, shall be strictly quiet and secret. Come."

Then hastening to open the door, Lord Leveson looked out into the passage to assure himself that the coast was clear; and finding that it was so, he led the way to the Crimson Drawing Room, where he knew lights to be burning.

"Will you remain here for a few moments," he asked, "while I go and send the attendants up to my niece? They will not return to her until they hear the bell ring, or else receive orders to the same effect."

"And what guarantee have I," demanded the Hangman, "that you won't come back to me with two or three constables at your heels?"

"The same guarantee which prevents me from ringing the bell now and summoning assistance:"—and as the Marquis thus spoke, he looked firmly in the Hangman's face.

"True!" said Daniel Coffin. "And besides, you dare not provoke exposure, for a variety of reasons. Go then—but be not long absent. One moment, however," he added, as a thought struck him, "What if any of your tall flunkeys should happen to come in here during your absence? They might think it rather odd to find a genelman like me in the place; and not believing my word that you and I are old friends and have got private business together, they might unceremoniously drag me out into the street and lug me off to the watchhouse. Now, this is a chance I should like to avoid."

"Well," said the Marquis, after a few moments' consideration, "take one of the candles and step in here. You have been there before," he added with bitter irony; "and I need scarcely assure you that my domestics are not in the habit of intruding into that part of the house."

Thus speaking, the Marquis unlocked the door leading into the suite of private apartments; and Daniel Coffin, taking up one of the wax-lights, proceeded into the adjacent room. Lord Leveson closed the door upon him; and as he did so a sudden expression of malignant triumph appeared upon the nobleman's features, as he muttered between his false teeth, "Nothing could be better! It aids the execution of the resolve which I have adopted."

He then quitted the Crimson Drawing Room and hastened to send the nurse up to his niece. Having done this, he sped to his own bed-chamber, and taking from a cupboard a case of pistols, ascertained that they were loaded. As he put in fresh priming, he said to himself, "All this must have an end. It is impossible to tolerate the persecutions of that monster any longer. His extortions and intrusions are beyond all bearing; and the oftener I yield, the greater will his exactions become. I will shoot him like any dog. The circumstance that he has stolen into the house unperceived by any one, will be corroborated by the servants; and the explanation of the tragedy will, therefore, be easy enough. What is it after all? I find a robber on the premises, and I shoot him. No one will think of inquiring how I came to have pistols so handy; and if the question be asked, an excuse is easily devised. O wretch, wretch! your hour is now come—and I will avenge my dying niece! But I must lose no time."

While these reflections passed hurriedly through Lord Leveson's brain, he concealed the pistols, which were small and of elegant workmanship, about his person, and retraced his way to the Crimson Drawing Room. Thence he proceeded into the adjacent apartment, where the Hangman was lounging negligently upon one of the splendid sofas, with his dusty boots on the velvet cushion.

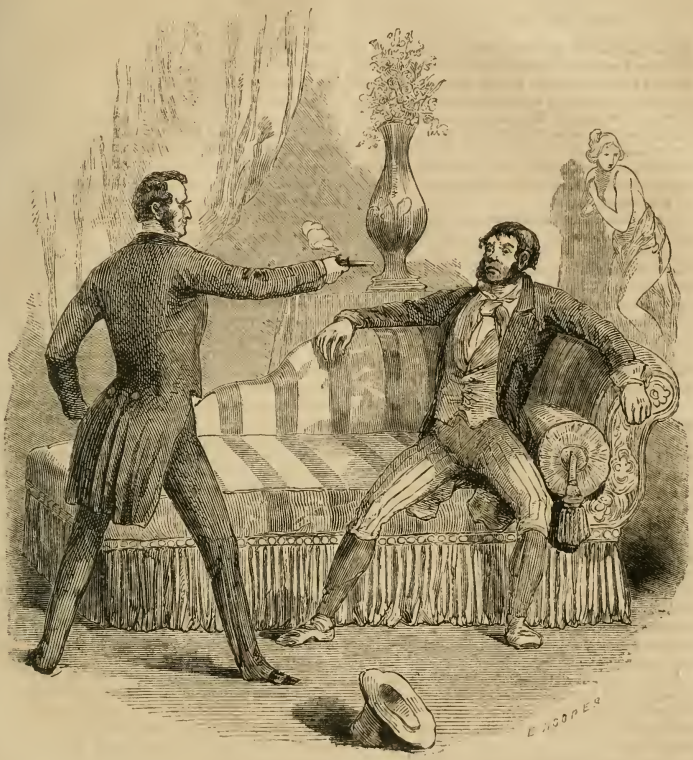
"Now," said the nobleman, "what do you require? what do you demand of me?"—and as he thus spoke, he placed himself in such a position as to be near enough to take sure aim of the Hangman without affording him the chance of springing up and dashing the pistol out of his hand the moment it should be drawn forth.

"I suppose your lordship knows," responded Coffin, raising himself to a sitting posture, "that I entertain a dreadful vengeance against your niece, Lady Ernestina; for I dare say she has told you everything?"

"Yes—everything!" replied the Marquis, his countenance ashy pale, but still with an expression of desperate firmness. "The atrocious outrage you committed upon her——"

"Outrage indeed!" echoed the Hangman contemptuously, as well as with ferocity in his looks: "but do you know, my lord, the different outrages this precious niece of yours has attempted against me—first plotting to stick a dagger into me at Westminster Bridge—then thrusting me into one of your queer chairs with the intention of leaving me to die of starvation——"

"Wretch!" ejaculated the Marquis of Leveson: and drawing forth one of the pistols with marvellous rapidity, he at once levelled it point blank at the Hangman's head.



But it flashed in the pan; and quick as the eye could wink—or like a tiger darting upon its prey—Daniel Coffin sprang with a ferocious growl at the Marquis, hurled him upon the carpet, put one hand over his mouth to prevent him from crying out, and with the other tore from his person the second pistol with which the nobleman was provided.

"You accursed old scoundrel!" said the Hangman, in a terrible voice: "what's to prevent me from blowing out your brains? But no," he immediately ejaculated, as a thought struck him; and his eyes flashed with malignant fires. "I will punish you in another way. Come—get up. But, by Satan! if you dare to cry out or approach the bell-ropes, I'll shoot you through the head with your own weapon."

The Public Executioner made the wretched Marquis rise from the floor; and seizing him by the collar of his coat, he pushed him into the next room. There he hurled him at once and with terrible violence into the nearest mechanical chair: the sharp click was heard—the machinery performed its work—and the Marquis of Leveson was in a moment a captive in one of the engines which had so often favoured his lustful designs against virgin innocence.

For nearly a minute the nobleman was so overcome by terror, consternation, and dismay, that he could not give utterance to a word. All that had just passed so hurriedly, seemed to be a phase in a hideous dream: but as his ideas began to collect themselves, he raised his looks in a beseeching manner towards Daniel Coffin. There was little light in the room: for the candle had been left burning in the adjacent one, and its beams shed but a faint lustre through the open doorway. In that uncertain light the Hangman's features appeared horrible indeed, with the expression of devilish malignity and glowering tri-

umph that was upon them; so that when the unhappy Marquis raised his eyes to that repulsive countenance, he beheld naught encouraging in the looks which met his own. Nevertheless, so utterly desperate was his position, that he was ready to catch at any straw of hope; and in a supplicating voice he said, "Coffin, you indeed have reason to be angry with me: but let us come to terms."

"Terms indeed!" echoed the Hangman, with a savage growl: "what terms can I come to with a treacherous old villain like you? It would be a pity, however, to leave anything valuable about your person."

Thus speaking, the ruffian proceeded to rifle the pockets of the miserable Marquis of all they contained. He took from the nobleman his watch and chain—the diamond pin from his shirt frill—the rings from his fingers—his purse and a roll of bank notes from his pocket.

"A thousand guineas if you let me go!" said the Marquis, awfully terrified.

"No—not if you offered me ten thousand—or twenty thousand!" replied the Hangman: "because I should know very well that you have only got some cursed treachery in view."

"On my soul and honour, as a noble and as a gentleman, I will keep faith with you!" urged the Marquis imploringly.

"I can't believe it," rejoined Daniel Coffin with brutal gruffness. "Things have gone too far betwixt you and me for us to have any more faith in each other. In fact, you must have been very desperate and felt that matters had come to a crisis, when you made up your mind to shoot me. But let me tell you, my lord, that my vengeance is not half finished yet! I mean to make the house too hot to hold you," added the villain, with a savage leer of fearful significancy.

He then turned abruptly away—fetched the wax-candle from the adjoining room—and as he held it in his hand, stopped in front of the now horror-stricken Marquis, saying in a terrible voice, "I mean by one bold stroke to put an end to you and your vile niece at once! By so doing I shall punish you both for all you have tried to do against me; and I shall at the same time relieve myself from any chance of being troubled by you in future. I know pretty well that if you noblemen make up your minds to ruin a poor devil like me, you won't hesitate at the means; and as I just now said, your lordship evidently feels that things have come to such a crisis that, no matter at what risk to yourself, you must get rid of me. So here goes!"

With these words, the Hangman, who had lashed himself up like any maddened tiger to a frenzy of rage, hurried on into the gallery containing all the specimens of art which the prurient imagination of Lord Leveson had at different times congregated there. The nobleman, fearfully alive to the full meaning of the miscreant's threats, called after him in an agonising voice of the most piteous entreaty, to relent—to come back—and to enter into amicable terms with him. But Daniel Coffin was deaf to all appeals; and rushing on into the gallery, he set fire to the draperies in every part.

Then, speeding back again, and heedless of the cries of the miserable Marquis, he traversed the suite of apartments—locked the door leading into the Crimson Drawing Room—issued thence—ascended the stairs without meeting a soul—gained the attics—and passed forth to the roof of the house. Reaching the empty dwelling a little higher up the street, he descended the dark and deserted stairs of that house, and let himself out through the area. Hurrying on to that extremity of the street which was farthest from Piccadilly, he there halted to observe the result of his atrocious proceeding. Nor did he wait long. In a very few minutes cries of "Fire" met his ears: a lurid light sprang up above Leveson House—and almost immediately afterwards the flames were seen gushing forth from the roof.

The Hangman, not choosing to be observed loitering about near the scene of his crime and his vengeance, hurried away, chuckling horribly to himself and gloating over the deed which he had accomplished.

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It was about five o'clock in the afternoon of the following day, when a post-chaise and four, on its way to London, dashed up to the door of the *Green Man* tavern at Blackheath, to change horses.

There was one person inside—a young gentleman of exceedingly handsome countenance, slender figure, and elegant appearance; and two domestics rode upon the box behind. One of these servants, who seemed the superior of the two and was in plain clothes—the other being in livery—leapt down the moment the chaise stopped, and urged the hostlers to use all possible despatch in changing the horses.

"You seem to be in a hurry?" said the landlord, who had come out to superintend the process, and perhaps with a hope that the traveller might need some refreshment.

"Yes," answered the domestic: "it is Lord Algernon Cavendish who is hastening to town to see his sister, Lady Ernestina Dysart, who is dying."

"Surely then," said the landlord, "they belong to the Leveson family—don't they?"

Brockman—for he it was—answered in the affirmative.

"Perhaps, then," you don't know what has happened?" said the landlord, with the air of a man who had some disagreeable tidings to impart.

"Know what?" demanded Brockman in amazement.

"I am sorry to say," was the rejoinder, "that I have got very bad news to tell——"

"Bad news? Speak! what do you mean?"

"I mean, unfortunately, that Leveson House was burnt down last night——"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Brockman. "But were any lives lost?"

"It is feared so," answered the landlord. "But I heard no particulars. There are a few lines in this morning's paper about it; but very little indeed—and no details. The guard of one of the London and Dover coaches told me this morning, as he passed on his way down, that there was a rumour up at the West End that the Marquis himself, a lady, and two or three of the servants, had been burnt to death—but he wasn't sure."

Brockman waited to hear no more, even if the landlord had anything farther to say: but hastening up to the carriage-window, the valet communicated to Lord Algernon Cavendish the intelligence he had just received.

"Oh, my poor sister!" exclaimed the young nobleman, clasping his hands in despair. "For God's sake tell the hostlers to make haste! Lavish gold, Brockman, upon the postilions. Suspense is intolerable!"

"All ready!" at this moment exclaimed the landlord.

Brockman hastened to give some instructions to the postilions, promising them liberal rewards if they sped like the wind; and then having mounted to his seat upon the box, he exclaimed, "All right!"—and away dashed the equipage towards the metropolis.

It would be difficult to describe the agonies of suspense which Lord Algernon Cavendish experienced during the three quarters of an hour which elapsed until the vehicle reached the corner of Albemarle Street. But in the meantime we will avail ourselves of the opportunity to state incidentally, that Brockman and John, while waiting on the pier at Dover for the sailing of the vessel which they had hired to convey them across to France, were agreeably surprised on beholding Lord Algernon Cavendish land from a sailing packet that arrived at the time from Calais. On hearing the object of their mission and receiving his uncle's notes, which they put into his hands, he as a matter of course had at once agreed to accompany them post-haste to London: but while stopping for a few minutes at Canterbury to change horses, he had seized the opportunity to pen a few brief lines to some one in the neighbourhood. This note he gave to one of the hotel-servants, together with a liberal fee, so that it might be conveyed at once to the place of its address; and then, the chaise being ready to start again, he had at once pursued his hurried journey. But alas! we have just seen what sad tidings awaited him at Blackheath: and now they were to be fearfully realized when the post-chaise entered Albemarle Street.

Leveson House had ceased to exist. Naught but a blackened ruin remained—the scathed and blasted skeleton of former pomp, magnificence, and grandeur! A crowd was collected in front of the burnt edifice: for the awful catastrophe had throughout the day attracted hundreds of persons at different times to the spot. Leaping forth from the vehicle, Algernon at once received from the nearest bystanders a terrible confirmation of the rumours that had reached him at Blackheath, relative to the fate of his uncle, his sister, and some of the servants.

It appeared that so terrible was the conflagration that it burst forth all in a moment, as if the house had been fired in several parts. All was in an instant confusion and dismay. Some of the domestics had rushed out into the street without pausing to care for any others of the inmates: but some had hastened up-stairs to rescue Lady Ernestina. The flames, however, forced them back: for the house, having an immense quantity of wood-work about it, burnt like tinder. All endeavours therefore to save Lady Ernestina Dysart were in vain; and equally futile was the hurried search made for the Marquis himself. But suddenly, as Lord Algernon's informant went on to relate, a large portion of the building gave way, and much of the interior was for a few brief instants exposed to the view of the crowd gathered in the street. Then was it that, to the horror of all the spectators, the Marquis of Leveson was seen writhing n a chair to which he appeared to be held fast by some unaccountable means! At all events, sure enough was it that the wretched nobleman was thus observed for that brief interval of a few instants, struggling and battling with convulsive desperation in the arm-chair whence it was but too evident he could not extricate himself. The flames were pouring like a torrent around him: in another instant he was utterly enveloped therein, and his appalling cries reached the ears of the horror-stricken spectators. Then another portion of the building gave way—a huge column of fire shot up as if a volcano had suddenly burst forth beneath the very foundations of the mansion—and no more was seen or heard of the wretched Marquis. Finally, it appeared that when a muster subsequently took place of all who had succeeded in escaping from the conflagration, Lord Leveson, Lady Ernestina, the nurse, the lady's-maid, and the old housekeeper, were missing. The fire had continued to burn for some hours afterwards: and now, amidst the charred and blackened remains, it was impossible to discover the slightest trace of those human beings who had fallen victims to its fury.

The origin of the conflagration appeared to be enveloped in the deepest mystery. It was impossible to account for so sudden and furious an outburst of the desolating element; and the utter ruin which had been caused, prevented the possibility of discovering the source of the disaster. The prevailing opinion however was that it had arisen from an accident; and in his den in Fleet Lane did the Hangman still gloat over the idea of the vengeance he had consummated and the wreck he had caused.

Lord Algernon Cavendish, who by this catastrophe had become Marquis of Leveson and the sudden possessor of enormous wealth, was overpowered with grief at the terrific fate of his sister.

Oh! to have been in time to see her ere she thus perished miserably—to have learnt from her lips that she was penitent for the past, and that she deplored the errors into which her strong passions had led her,—this would have been a solace to the generous-hearted young nobleman! Little recked he for the nobler title, the more exalted rank, and the vastly superior riches which he thus inherited: his soul was stricken with grief to think that his uncle and his sister should have died in so shocking a manner.

CHAPTER CXCVI.

LOUISA'S LOVER.

SEVERAL days had elapsed since the occurrences took place at Canterbury, which have been recorded in previous chapters: and Lady Sackville was still an inmate of the cottage. She had received letters alike from her husband and her half-brother Valentine: she had also received answers to the epistles she had addressed to Miss Bathurst and the Prince Regent. As least important we will speak of the latter ones first.

Miss Bathurst had written kindly, but still in the strain of a thorough woman-of-the-world. She

expressed herself perfectly satisfied with the manner in which Lady Sackville had fulfilled the terms of her agreement in all respects: she admitted that neither she nor Mrs. Fitzherbert had any farther request to make at the hands of Royalty; and therefore they required not Lady Sackville's services any more. Accordingly, so far as Miss Bathurst was concerned personally, she had no objection to offer to Venetia's retirement from the Court circle: but she bade her "dear young friend," as she called her, reflect maturely ere she voluntarily gave up a position which, once abdicated, could never be regained. Venetia,—for Clara Stanley still preserved this Christian name, it being the one which figured in the *Peerage* and which she therefore could not give up,—was in no way moved from her settled purpose by Miss Bathurst's reasoning; and Louisa, to whom she showed the letter, was overjoyed to find her sister so resolute in the step which was for ever to remove her from the sphere of temptations.

The Prince Regent's letter was full of mingled entreaties and reproaches. He was after his own fashion much attached to Venetia; but his love, if such it may be termed, was entirely of a sensual character. Although during his connexion with her he had indulged in other intrigues—as for instance with Penelope Arbuthnot, Lady Ernestina, and Mrs. Malpas—yet he was very far from being sated with Venetia's charms: and moreover, all Prince though he were, he was not a little proud of possessing as a mistress the most splendid creature that ever had appeared at the English Court—perhaps indeed the handsomest woman that England had ever produced. He therefore wrote in an impassioned style to Venetia, imploring her to return—reminding her of all the benefits he had showered upon herself, her husband, and the numerous persons for whom at any time she had solicited his favours—and promising to bestow a dukedom upon Horace, so that she might become a Duchess, if she would retrace her steps to Carlton House. He even declared that if she refused, he should be inclined to come after her in defiance of public opinion; and he enjoined her in any case to answer his letter by return of post. Venetia *did* answer it—but only to reiterate her former resolution. She renewed the expressions of her gratitude for the royal bounties which herself, her husband, and her friends had received; but she emphatically declared that not only was her own happiness, but likewise that of others who were very dear to her, dependent on the resolve she had taken. She besought his Royal Highness not to commit any folly by coming after her, as such a step could only lead to a painful scene, without any beneficial result. This letter she likewise showed to Louisa, and the charming girl was still more rejoiced by that additional proof of her sister's fixity of purpose.

Sir Valentine Malvern stated in his letter that in a very long interview with Lord Sackville, he had represented everything that Venetia wished him to say to her husband; and that Horace had stated but few scruples and raised but very slight objections in respect to the abandonment of a Court life. Sir Valentine sincerely congratulated his half-sister upon the satisfactory result of that interview, and concluded by stating that when married to Florence Eaton, he would pay both his half-sisters a visit, wherever they might be at the time, in company with his bride.

The letter of Horace Sackville was just what Venetia had expected. Her husband commenced by declaring how rejoiced he was to find a marriage relation in so excellent, amiable, and generous-hearted a young man as Valentine Malvern. He went on to say that he could without much regret abandon his high position at Court, and devote himself thenceforth to the cultivation of domestic bliss in the society of Venetia. He declared that for his part he would strive to his utmost to fling a veil over all that was past, so that no unpleasant memories should interfere to mar their future happiness. He emphatically promised that never would he make Venetia's by-gone frailties a subject of reproach to her, inasmuch as he himself was a willing accomplice in what had occurred and had profited thereby. He dwelt at considerable length upon those scenes of tenderness, contrition, and remorse, which had episodically marked their career of brilliant dissipation, and to which Venetia herself had touchingly alluded in her letters. He said even at the time when those scenes occurred, he had experienced a sort of presentiment that they were harbingers of future reformation; and he instanced them as proofs that however warped the good principles of the heart might become by external influences and surrounding circumstances, yet that *no heart* could be wholly lost when it was accessible to the better feelings of human nature. In a postscript he added that Valentine Malvern had behaved towards him with the utmost liberality, having advanced him twenty thousand pounds to settle all his liabilities and enable him to quit his post with honour and credit to himself; and he concluded by observing that so soon as these debts were liquidated and the business of his department as Lord Steward of the Prince Regent's household could be properly wound up—which would be in the course of a few days—he would repair to Canterbury to rejoin his wife and to be presented to her sister and aunt.

Altogether Lord Sackville's letter was one that gave sincere pleasure to Venetia, and likewise to the gentle Louisa,—making the latter think much better of her noble brother-in-law than even Venetia's representations had previously done. Nor less was Miss Stanley herself well pleased with the correspondence of Lord Sackville and Sir Valentine Malvern; and most affectionately did she embrace her elder niece when she found her so determined in rejecting the advice of Miss Bathurst and remaining firm against the entreaties of the Prince Regent.

It was in the middle of the day following that on which these letters were received, that a note, addressed to Louisa, was delivered at the cottage. She instantaneously recognized the hand-writing of her lover, and, with fluttering heart, tore it open. Its contents were these:—

"Fountain Hotel, Canterbury,
"One o'clock.

"I have but a moment, my ever beloved Louisa, to inform you that I am arrived safe from the Continent. Oh! you cannot imagine, my angel, with what affliction it is that I am compelled to pass through Canterbury without being able even to speed to your home and fold you in my arms! But urgent matters compel me to hasten on, without delay, to London. When you learn the cause you will not reproach me. I know that you have too much

confidence in my love and affection to fancy for an instant that aught save the most imperious circumstances could prevent me from coming *first* to you, on my arrival in England after this long, long absence. But in two or three days you will be certain to see me; and then, my ever loved Louisa, we shall meet to part no more. Then also will I give you explanations relative to many things which for certain reasons I have hitherto kept concealed from you.

"Your ever affectionate and devoted,
"JOCELYN LOFTUS."

The young maiden wept as she perused this note: but they were tears of joy which trickled down her lovely cheeks. For Jocelyn was come back—he had arrived safe in England at last—and her love was of too holy and too confiding a character to permit her for an instant to imagine that he had devised any false pretext for not coming at once to see her. In a few days he would be there—and Oh! *then* what happiness would await her!

Miss Stanley and Venetia sincerely congratulated Louisa upon Jocelyn's return; and when they read that part of the note which alluded to certain explanations which he meant to give her, they exchanged a quick smile of intelligence: for Venetia had privately confided to her aunt who Jocelyn Loftus really was; and that worthy relative was full well convinced of the unimpeachable integrity, the high character, and the chivalrous nature of him who was shortly to wed the beauteous Louisa.

On the second morning after the receipt of this letter another one came from Jocelyn. It was a mourning one, with deep black edges, and with a black seal: but this seal was stamped with aristocratic armorial bearings, surmounted by a Peer's coronet. Its contents ran as follow:—

"I write a few lines, my dearest Louisa, to say that you may expect me to-morrow. You will perceive by my mourning letter that I have experienced a severe family loss. Such is indeed the case; and this may partially explain to you the circumstances which compelled me in such a hurried manner to pass through Canterbury and repair to London on my arrival in England. I have called at Carlton House—have seen Lord Sackville—and have learnt from him that you know all relative to your sister, and that she is now with you. Oh! tell her, dearest Louisa, that it was with the most unfeigned rejoicing I heard from her husband's lips her resolve to abandon a Court life; and equally pleased am I to hear that Lord Sackville himself is firm in the same intention. He and I have shaken hands as men whom marriage will soon place in the light of brothers; and you must tell your sister that she also is to welcome me as a brother when I come to-morrow. Nor less has it been with the purest delight that I have heard of the happy restoration of your excellent aunt to a comparatively perfect state of health. Present my sincerest regards to her.

"I learn from Lord Sackville that your sister has not as yet revealed to you the secret who I am, but that she has left all explanations on that head to be given by me. Be it so. Present circumstances—circumstances which have indeed greatly changed by the deaths that have plunged me into mourning—have induced me to resume my legitimate standing in society; and this much I will tell you *now*, dearest Louisa, that the only joy I experience in the possession of rank and wealth is because I can make you, beloved girl, the sharer of both. But all this will be revealed to-morrow.

"I shall leave London at such an hour so as to be in Canterbury at three o'clock punctually. At that hour I shall alight at the *Fountain Hotel*. Perhaps, if you and your sister should be inclined for a walk about that time, you might meet me there; as you may be well assured that I shall count every moment as an intolerable delay until I once more fold you in my arms.

"For the last time, dearest Louisa, do I sign myself by the name of

"JOCELYN."

"He will be here to-day!" exclaimed the overjoyed Louisa, her angelic countenance radiant with delight: and Oh! how truly beautiful did the amiable girl appear at this moment;—but the next instant a shade of sadness passed over her countenance and tears began to trickle down her cheeks, as she murmured with tremulous voice, "Poor Jocelyn! he has evidently lost those who were dear to him. He speaks of deaths in his family: it is therefore more than one who has died!"—and she wept for his sake.

But Venetia and Miss Stanley understood full well who they were that had thus died, although they were as yet utterly ignorant of the way of their deaths. But not only did that seal with the armorial bearings indicate who *one* was that had thus died—but knowing also who was the other nearest relative that Jocelyn had, they had no difficulty in conjecturing for whose loss he was the most deeply grieved. Louisa was too little acquainted with aristocratic usages and noble emblems, to gather any clue to her lover's real rank from that heraldic seal; nor indeed was her gentle heart much moved by the prospect of wealth and rank to which he alluded in his letter. It was sufficient for her happiness that her lover was coming to meet her again that day, and that he wrote in a style which assured her of his constant affection. Nor will the reader blame her if, soon wiping away her tears, she abandoned herself to the delicious thoughts which it was natural she should experience at the certainty of beholding him in a few hours; and again did she receive the warmest congratulations from her aunt and sister.

It was an immense relief to the mind of Lady Sackville to learn that Louisa's lover was prepared to overlook all the past so far as she was concerned, and that with the natural generosity of his soul he had conveyed so delicate and soothing an intimation that their meeting would be of the most friendly and cordial nature. And now does the reader ask whether as three o'clock of that afternoon approached, there were any persons wending their way towards the *Fountain Hotel*, to be there in readiness to meet the expected one? Yes—the two sisters were threading the Dane John in that direction; and fain would Miss Stanley have accompanied them, but that she feared to walk too far in her still enervated condition. But Lady Sackville and Louisa did repair to the hotel; and as her ladyship was already known there—her equipage and servants being all this while at that establishment—she and her sister were at once received with the utmost respect. They were conducted to a private sitting-room; and Lady Sackville whispered to one of her own domestics a few words stating for whom she and her sister were now waiting.

Half an-hour passed; and soon after the clocks of the old cathedral and the numerous other churches of Canterbury had struck three, the sounds of an equipage dashing up the narrow street in which the *Fountain Hotel* is situated, called forth all the dependants of the establishment. A splendid travelling-carriage, with armorial blazonry upon the panels, and drawn by four

post-horses, whirled up to the hotel and passed in through the gateway.

The apartment in which Lady Sackville and Louisa were awaiting the expected one's coming, commanded from its windows a view of the court-yard into which the equipage had rolled: and when they beheld him whom they expected alight, Louisa felt the faintness of excessive joy come over her.

"Compose yourself, my sweet sister," said Lady Sackville. "Oh! how delighted I am that this cup of happiness is so filled up to the brim for you!"

Louisa could not give utterance to a word; but throwing herself into her sister's arms she wept for joy on her bosom. And now hurried footsteps were heard approaching along the passage; and the next moment one of the hotel waiters threw open the door, and with officious importance, announced in a loud tone, "THE MARQUIS OF LEVESON!"

A faint shriek escaped Louisa's lips as this name struck upon her ears: but the next instant she beheld the object of her best and purest affections—and springing towards each other, they were clasped in a fond embrace.

Again and again did the young Marquis—for such indeed was Jocelyn Loftus—strain the damsel to his heart; and she, weeping and smiling—glorious in her beauty and in her rapturous feelings as an April morning that is all sunshine and showers—gave back the fond caresses. Lady Sackville wept for joy at the sight; and if anything were now required to rivet the firmness of her resolve to trust only henceforth for happiness in sweet domestic bliss, it was the spectacle of the ineffable delight—so pure, so chaste, and holy too—that was now experienced by this fond couple.

When the first full flood of joy had somewhat found its vent, the Marquis of Leveson turned towards Lady Sackville; and taking her hand, he kissed her forehead, saying, "Dear sister—for such you will shortly become to me—I am truly delighted to meet you here."

"And never henceforth, Algernon," answered Lady Sackville in a low and hurried voice—a voice that was tremulous too with profound emotion—"shall you have to blush to acknowledge me in any way as a friend or as a relative!"

The young Marquis pressed her hand in token that he received the assurance as an evidence of her contrition and her good faith, and that he put confidence in it. Then again turning towards his Louisa, he made her sit down by him on the sofa; and taking her hand, which he retained in his own, he said, "Beloved one, the officious zeal which the servant ere now manifested in announcing my name so suddenly—a little incident which in my haste to fold you in my arms I did not foresee, not indeed thinking that he had time to learn from my own domestics who I was—elicited an ejaculation of dismay from your lips. Yes, dearest Louisa, that name which he announced so abruptly is indeed the one which I now bear; and as I declared in my letter, if there were ever a moment when I felt that I had reason to rejoice in that lofty rank which I possess, it is now, my angel, that I can ask you to become the sharer of it. I know full well that for a mind so pure, so ingenuous, and so artless as your's, the splendours of rank have no dazzling brilliancy, and the possession of illimitable wealth no factitious allurements; but still, constituted as society is, and considering the honour which the world shows to persons occupying an elevated position, it cannot be held as a misfortune that I am enabled to place a coronet upon this fair brow of thine, and to bear you away in due course to splendid mansions situated in the midst of vast estates, and bid you regard them all as your own!"

Louisa, still weeping and smiling, threw her arms about her lover's neck, and kissed him fondly in token of gratitude for the language which he thus held towards her. And, Oh! whatever painful adventures the maiden might have passed through—whatever sorrowful reflections she might at any time have known—whatever misgivings for a season she might have entertained through the treachery of the late Marquis of Leveson in respect to her lover's fidelity—how immeasurable beyond compare was the recompense which she now received!

For a little space, a shade of sadness was thrown over the scene, when the young Marquis related the catastrophe which had deprived him of his sister Ernestina—that same catastrophe in which his uncle's life had also terminated so miserably. Forgotten *then* was any ill which for a time the generous-hearted Louisa had sustained at the hands of either the late Marquis or of the perished Ernestina; and the tears ran down her cheeks as she listened to the sad tale which her lover recited.

But we will not dwell upon this: for it would be a ridiculous affectation to pretend that the late tragedy could materially mar the happiness which the lovers experienced at being thus re-united—re-united, also, under circumstances so auspicious as to portend no more parting!

Let us follow the young Marquis of Leveson as with Venetia on one arm and Louisa on the other, he repaired to that cottage where in times past he had first learnt to esteem the amiable qualities of his intended bride, and in learning to esteem her had learnt to love her. Let us suppose the cottage reached, and Miss Stanley appearing at the garden-gate to give the most cordial welcome to the Marquis of Leveson: and then, while the happy party are sitting down to the dinner which Mary the servant-maid had prepared in her very best style, and which the aunt in good sooth had specially superintended—let us devote the following chapter to certain explanations relative to him who throughout so large a portion of our narrative has figured as Jocelyn Loftus.

CHAPTER CXCVII.

THE YOUNG NOBLEMAN.

LORD ALGERNON CAVENDISH (now the Marquis of Leveson) and Lady Ernestina Cavendish (afterwards the wife of Mr. Dysart) were the only children of Lord Jocelyn Loftus Cavendish, younger brother of the late Marquis of Leveson who perished in the fire. Their parents had died early, leaving them but indifferently provided for. A country-seat in the north of England, and a small estate producing a bare six hundred a-year, devolved to Algernon; while a few thousand pounds in the funds were the whole fortune of Ernestina. Algernon was educated at Eton, and subsequently passed three years at Cambridge—not with the view of entering the church, but for the purpose of

finishing his studies. There he acquitted himself well; and was known as a young man of excellent disposition, great steadiness of habits, and of the most upright principles. His sister Ernestina was placed at a fashionable boarding-school at Kensington. We have said in one of the earlier chapters of this history, that from her childhood she was a special favourite with her uncle the Marquis of Leveson, who regularly sent for her from school every Saturday to pass the interval with him till the Monday morning. But what with the shallow kind of tutelage she experienced at the fashionable seminary and the utter unfitness of such a confirmed voluptuary as the Marquis to be her guardian, the young lady was not reared in a manner at all calculated to settle her mind upon the foundation of sterling moral principle, or to curb those passions which she naturally possessed.

During a dangerous illness which the Marquis of Leveson experienced, Ernestina, grateful for his kindness towards her, nursed him with the utmost attention; and this circumstance rivetted the attachment which the nobleman felt for his niece. On leaving school she became altogether an inmate of Leveson House, where her brother Algernon was likewise at the time passing a few weeks. But Algernon had not been accustomed to spend his holidays, when at Eton or the University, with his uncle. The young man, from the samples of the British Aristocracy he met with at the public seminaries, had conceived no very great affection for the order to which he belonged; and having an uncle (by his late mother's side) dwelling in a distant county and entirely devoted to agricultural pursuits, Algernon had always preferred spending the vacations with him. This relative, however, died just before Algernon quitted Cambridge for good; and thus was it that he went to pass some little time at Leveson House. While there, he could not help obtaining some insight into the real character of his uncle. Though himself of the steadiest habits, he was still experienced enough in the ways of the world—particularly after passing through the fiery ordeal of a College life—to perceive that his uncle was a confirmed voluptuary of the most unprincipled desoription; and a circumstance which soon after occurred, made him look with loathing and horror upon his noble relative's character.

The incident we refer to was this. One day Algernon was reading in the Crimson Drawing Room, when he heard sounds resembling female shrieks that either appeared to be stifling, as if with a gag placed upon the lips, or else were penetrating through very thick walls which well nigh deadened them. They continued; and the idea struck Algernon forcibly that they came from one of the inner rooms of the mansion. He had observed that the suite of apartments communicating from the Crimson Drawing Room were always shut up: but until this moment he had never paid much attention to the circumstance. Now, however, the mystery that was evidently connected with those rooms instantaneously associated itself in his mind with the screams which, though so faintly, were still reaching his ears. All the natural generosity and chivalrous enterprise of his nature were suddenly awakened by the thought that some female was enduring ill-treatment in those apartments. He flew to the door communicating therewith. By a most unusual oversight that door had been left unlocked. He opened it—and the screams, emanating from an inner room, now sounded loud and piercing. Rushing onward, Algernon penetrated into the adjacent apartment; and there did an astounding spectacle meet his eyes. A lovely young creature, imprisoned in one of the mechanical chairs, was giving vent to her anguish—while the Marquis of Leveson, in the maddened fury of his excited passions, was literally stripping her garments off her. Her dress was all torn open—her bosom was bare—and the nobleman, regardless of her anguished shame, was gloating upon her charms previous to making himself the master of them. The unexpected presence of Algernon filled the intended victim with hope, but inspired the Marquis with the rage of disappointment. He imperiously commanded Algernon to withdraw, covering him with reproaches for an intrusion which he attributed to the basest sentiment of curiosity. But the young man would not obey his incensed uncle; and taking up a shawl from the carpet, he threw it over the shoulders of the young female, insisting that she should be immediately released from the bondage of the chair. The Marquis dared not refuse compliance with his nephew's demand. The girl was accordingly liberated; and a handsome sum of money was given by the unprincipled voluptuary to hush up the affair with her parents.

The reader may easily suppose that Algernon was not likely to remain another hour beneath his uncle's roof; and he insisted upon taking Ernestina away with him. The Marquis, in tones of the most abject entreaty, besought Algernon not to expose him to the world, nor even hint at anything of a disparaging nature to his character in Ernestina's presence. Algernon readily promised compliance with these requests—in the first place, because it was contrary to the natural generosity of his disposition to inflict an injury; and in the second place, because he was careful not to say anything that might shock the purity of his sister's mind. It was therefore agreed that Ernestina should be placed in the care of some distant female relatives, who resided a little way out of London; and for this proceeding some excuse was devised. Algernon, having seen his sister safe in her new home, set out upon a journey to the Highlands of Scotland, the sublime and striking scenery of which he had for some time been anxious to visit.

After an absence of about a year, Algernon returned to London, expecting to find Ernestina still with her female relatives, from whose dwelling the letters he had received during the interval had been dated. But to his surprise and annoyance, he found that since he last heard from her a few weeks previous to his return, she had grown so weary of the monotonous and quiet life which her relations led, that she had gone back of her own accord to Leveson House, where the Marquis, who really entertained a great affection for her and had much missed her society, cheerfully received her. Whilst staying with th[illegible] female relatives, she had fallen in with Mr. Dysart, who, though so much older than herself, had managed to win her affections. On her brother's return to London, finding that he much disapproved of her having gone back to Leveson House, and impatient of th

control which she fancied he sought to exercise over her, she at once yielded to Mr. Dysart's solicitations and married him. The match was most unpalatable both to her uncle and her brother; and the former vowed that he never would speak to Paul Dysart, much less receive him inside his door, as long as he lived. Algernon, though likewise disapproving of the alliance, because he had a bad opinion of Dysart's character, nevertheless visited the newly married pair at their residence at Blackheath: but soon afterwards he quitted London on a fresh excursion, and made the tour of Wales.

On his return to the capital, he repaired to Blackheath to visit his sister. Entering the grounds of the villa, he heard Ernestina's voice issuing from an arbour densely embowered in surrounding trees. Thinking that she was with her husband, he at once approached the spot; and to his mingled astonishment and dismay, beheld her in the arms of an individual who was entirely unknown to him. This was Sir Archibald Malvern. Algernon, in his resentment, was about to inflict summary chastisement upon the seducer of his sister; but Ernestina, falling upon her knees, besought him to forbear from a proceeding that would inevitably create a disturbance and lead to exposure. The young nobleman accordingly subdued his angry feelings, but peremptorily ordered Sir Archibald to quit the premises at once. He then sat down with his sister, and in anguish of heart remonstrated with her upon her guilt, which it was impossible for her to deny. But now that the immediate danger of exposure was removed, Ernestina resented what she termed "the supervision he ever continued to exercise over her conduct." Algernon was deeply afflicted to observe that Ernestina adopted such a course instead of displaying contrition; and he conjured her to reflect ere she prosecuted a career which would inevitably plunge her into disgrace sooner or later. But the more affectionate and conciliatory became her brother's manner, the more haughty and impatient was the spirit which she displayed; and they parted thus, with anger on her side and deep despondency on his own.

Then was it that the high-minded Algernon felt actually ashamed of the family to which he belonged, and blushed for the name he bore—a name which stamped him as a scion of this family which seemed resolved to disgrace itself. The train of thought into which he fell, revived all the antipathies he had for some time experienced in respect to the aristocratic order to which he belonged; and he said to himself, "If ever I marry it shall not be a daughter of the Aristocracy. No—I will endeavour to find some maiden of innocence, virtue, and probity in a lowlier sphere—a maiden who, while possessing the attractions of her sex, shall be unacquainted with any of its vices." Thereupon he formed the resolution of abandoning—he cared not even if it were for ever—his lordly rank and took his late father's christian and surname, *Jocelyn Loftus*. Leaving London, he visited his country-seat in the North of England, where he passed some time. The abdication of Fontainebleau and the retreat of the Emperor Napoleon to Elba giving peace to Europe, the young nobleman visited the Continent, where he stayed some months. On returning to England, he made the tour of Kent, and at length arrived in Canterbury. The old cathedral-city, with its quietude and its many antiquarian remains, together with its beautiful circumjacent scenery, was pleasing to Lord Algernon Cavendish; and he was induced to remain there for a few weeks. One evening, after a long ramble in the country, he was returning to his hotel, when on passing through the cloistral avenue in the vicinage of the cathedral, he suddenly heard voices in altercation; and before he reached the spot a sufficiency of what was said reached his ears to afford him a very painful insight into the nature of the dispute. A female was reproaching some one of the male sex in the bitterest terms, reminding him that years back he had seduced her, and that he had even been base enough to propose to her the murder of the child which was the offspring of their illicit amour. The female went on to upbraid her companion with having shamefully abandoned her at the time, and by his cruelties plunged her into that frenzied state of mind which had led her to become the murderess of her babe. Algernon, horrified at what he heard, was so bewildered that he scarcely knew what he was doing; and instead of retreating unperceived, he remained rooted to the spot,—a turning in the cloister still concealing him from the disputants, and them from him. But suddenly the female gave vent to a loud cry, imploring mercy; and her companion in a terrible voice denounced her as his "evil genius" and threatened to kill her outright. Thereupon Algernon sprang forward, and beheld in the gathering gloom of the hour and the place a female upon her knees at the feet of an individual whom he immediately recognized to be the Rev. Bernard Audley, with whom he had formed some slight acquaintance at a reading-room during his sojourn in Canterbury. The female, who was dressed in deep black, was, as the reader of course understands, none other than Lilian Halkin. But with her name, or anything concerning her beyond what he had just heard, Algernon was at the time utterly unacquainted. The Minor Canon's hand was raised to strike her down: but he instantly fell back with an ejaculation of alarm, while Lilian sprang to her feet the moment he thus made his appearance. Then, quickly drawing down her veil, Lilian seized Algernon by the arm, saying in a quick and excited voice, "Thanks—a thousand thanks, whoever you are, for your well-meant interference: but unless you promise me one thing, I shall not continue to experience any gratitude towards you."—Algernon at once replied that he had no interest in doing anything to produce vexation in respect to a lady who, judging from what he had heard, was already sufficiently afflicted.—"Then promise me, kind-hearted stranger," said Lilian, "that you will not expose elsewhere this scene of which accident has made you a witness."—The young nobleman answered, "You may rely upon it, madam, that the private affairs of yourself and Mr. Audley shall not be made the topic of useless scandal or idle gossip on my part."—Lilian thanked him cordially, and then hurried away.—"I also thank you, Mr. Loftus, for the pledge you have just given," said Bernard Audley, so soon as they were alone together; but Algernon merely bowed coldly, and passing hurriedly on, retraced his way to the hotel where he was stopping.

We need not do more than in a few words re-

mind the reader that it was through Bernard Audley's insolent conduct towards Louisa Stanley in the Dane John, that Algernon subsequently became acquainted with the beauteous damsel. This incident occurred a short time after the adventure in the cloister, which the young nobleman was compelled to fling as a menace at the infamous clergyman in order to force him to a precipitate departure from the scene of his gross attempt to undermine the purity of Louisa. Thanks to this incident, Algernon was at length brought in contact with a charming, amiable, and excellent girl, answering the very description of that embodiment of all female excellencies which he had depicted to himself as the being that could alone win his heart or be deserving of his hand. We have seen how he cultivated her acquaintance—how each day his favourable opinion of her grew confirmed—and how the more he saw of her, the more her amiable qualities developed themselves. At first he thought, when resolved to declare his love, of frankly stating who he was; but then the idea struck him that he would still retain the *incognito*, or rather his assumed name, in order to convince himself beyond all possibility of doubt that the humble cottage maiden could love him for himself alone, irrespective of his lordly rank. Moreover, he felt so truly ashamed of the profligacies, the vices, and the immoralities associated with the name of the Marquis of Leveson, that he shrank from the idea of confessing himself to be the nephew of that unprincipled voluptuary. He therefore continued in Louisa's eyes as plain Jocelyn Loftus. When his love had been declared and he delicately furnished just so much information respecting himself that Louisa's sister Clara, then in London, might make inquiries concerning his eligibility as Louisa's suitor, he wrote to his banker, giving that gentleman instructions to what extent he was to speak of him to any one

calling to take such references; and hence the guarded manner in which the banker spoke when Clara visited him for the purpose.

Having become the accepted suitor of Louisa, Algernon's intention was to bear her away after the bridal to his country-seat in the north of England, and to transport thither her invalid aunt also. But when last at his rural mansion, he had observed that much of the furniture was in a dilapidated condition and that considerable repairs were required for the dwelling itself. Moreover, it was necessary to have a carriage built expressly for the purpose of the long journey which the aunt would have to take; and paralysed as she then was, the vehicle must be fitted internally with a couch for her accommodation. To effect all this, a considerable sum of money was needed; and though Algernon was far from extravagant, yet his frequent tours and journies had exhausted all the resources arising from his comparatively narrow income of six hundred a year. He required a couple of thousand guineas, and had to choose from three ways of obtaining that amount. The first was to mortgage a portion of his income: but this would be to reduce it to so small a revenue as to render it impossible to provide as he could wish for his Louisa and her aunt at his country-seat. The second plan which suggested itself, was to borrow money on the security of his expectations as heir to the title and estates of his uncle the Marquis: but he abhorred the idea of giving post-obit bonds and entering into the demoralization of usurious proceedings. The third method was to apply direct to his uncle; and much as he disliked the thought of coming in contact with that nobleman, especially to ask a favour, he was nevertheless compelled to make up his mind to this proceeding. After some deliberation with himself, he to a certain extent surmounted his scruples by the reflection that as the heir to the estates of the Marquis it was scarcely a favour which he would be asking, especially if he did it in a frank and manly way, without servility or cringing. He therefore proceeded to London—visited his uncle—and procured the money. Losing no time, he remitted a sufficient sum to the steward of his little estate in the north, accompanied with instructions how it was to be expended in the purchase of furniture and the repairs of the mansion: and he gave orders to a carriage-builder in London for the construction of a vehicle with the accommodations requisite for the use of the then invalid aunt of his Louisa.

But all these preparations for his bridal were somewhat prematurely taken; for, as we have seen, the circumstance of his encounter with Mary Owen made him acquainted with that conspiracy against the Princess of Wales which hurried him on into the series of adventures and whirled him as it were through the storm of incidents that have been duly described in our pages.

Now at last these adventures were finished—those incidents had been brought to a conclusion—and we behold our young hero, no longer as Jocelyn Loftus—nor indeed as Lord Algernon Cavendish—but as the Marquis of Leveson, reunited to her whom he loved so fondly and whom he was shortly to make his bride.

The reader is now acquainted with all that has hitherto been wrapped up in mystery relative to this excellent young man; and it was the outline of the above explanations which, after dinner at the cottage, he gave to Miss Stanley, Lady Sackville, and Louisa. We need scarcely observe that he touched but lightly upon those particulars that threw out the characters of his departed uncle and perished sister in so disagreeable a light; and this reserve he practised partly from generous motives in respect to the dead, and partly because some of the details were unsuitable for the ears of the innocent Louisa.

On the following day Miss Stanley the aunt, in a private conversation with the Marquis of Leveson, made him acquainted with that fresh outrage which Bernard Audley had attempted to perpetrate, and which had been the cause of her restoration to vitality and consciousness. The young nobleman was deeply indignant at this narrative. But when he learnt from Miss Stanley's lips of that history of the past regarding Mrs. Owen, Melissa, and Lilian, and thereby was informed that the lady in black whom he had seen in the cloister could have been none other than Lilian herself, he resolved upon consigning Bernard Audley's recent atrocity to oblivion. For Miss Stanley knew not that all Lilian's long-cherished love for that bad man had recently turned into the deadliest hate, accompanied by cravings for a bitter vengeance; and thus the young Marquis was left with the impression that the unfortunate Lilian was still attached to her seducer. For this reason was it, and for Lilian's sake, that he came to the determination of passing over the Minor Canon's conduct in silence—especially as he had made up his mind to remain altogether at Canterbury until, after a decent period of mourning for his sister and uncle, he might lead Louisa to the altar. In the meantime he would be near to guard her from any further danger—although not for an instant did he imagine that so long as he was upon the spot, the infamous clergyman would renew his persecutions.

CHAPTER CXCVIII.

THE CLIFF.

The scene now changes to Dover.

It was the day following that of which we have been writing; and a lady, elegantly dressed, was sauntering alone upon the eminences which terminate abruptly in the chalky cliffs fronting the sea. She was tall and well formed: but her countenance was concealed with a thick veil, folded in such a manner that not even the keenest eyes could penetrate through it so as to discern her features.

To all appearance, judging by her figure—which was very slender, but perfectly upright, and replete with symmetrical grace—she was by no means advanced in years; and as she walked slowly along, the feet and ankles which glanced beneath her dress, seemed most delicately shaped. Altogether, she was one whom it was impossible to pass by with indifference; and the air of mystery with which the thick veil, so carefully folded, invested her, added to the interest of her appearance.

It was mid-day; and the sun was shining gloriously. Calm as an immense lake of quicksilver, stretched the sea far away, until it was bounded in the eastern horizon by a barely perceptible line which

marked the coast of France. Not a breeze ruffled the surface of the ocean; and the sails of the vessels hung as it were listless and passive to the masts.

Slowly did the lady continue her walk, but frequently stopping to gaze upon the mighty expanse of waters which stretched before her from the base of the cliffs on whose summit she was sauntering. And yet it did not altogether seem that she thus paused to view the enchanting prospect; but by her very attitude and manner it was evident that through the thick folds of her veil she was gazing upon vacancy. Several times she turned quite round, and looked in the direction of the town which lay at the foot of the deep indentation of the cliffs, as if a hollow had been hewn away to afford room for the site of that multitude of buildings. Was she awaiting some one?—had she sauntered hither in the hope of being overtaken by a person that she expected to issue from the town and speed across the heights to join her there?

Presently the sounds of a horse's feet reached her ears as she was pursuing her walk: and now a sudden vibration appeared to thrill through her entire form, galvanizing her as it were with the electricity of some feeling abruptly and profoundly stirred. But this time she neither paused nor looked round: she continued her way as if simulating unconsciousness that any one was approaching her.

In a few minutes she was overtaken by the person on horseback; and this was none other than the Rev. Bernard Audley, Minor Canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

On reaching the lady he reined in his steed, and made a courteous bow, saying, "I am here, fair but mysterious unknown, in pursuance of the *billet* which I received last evening at my hotel."

"How know you that I am fair?" asked the lady, in a voice that was barely audible.

"Do you not tell me in that note which I received," said the clergyman, "that I have inspired you with a passion which, if I can reciprocate it, you will be found worthy of?—and what does that mean, if not a consciousness on your part that you *are* beautiful?"

The lady made no reply; and a silence of nearly a minute took place. Then, leaping from his horse, Bernard Audley said in his most winning tone, "Do for heaven's sake shake off this timidity—if such it be: throw aside all mystery—and let me behold the countenance of whose loveliness I have a presentiment!"

"Pray, Mr. Audley, remount your horse," said the lady, still speaking in a very low voice, but now with much agitation in the tones. "We shall be seen—and it looks all too familiar for you to have dismounted thus to walk by my side. It appears like an appointment given; whereas if you keep on horseback, it will have the air of a simple acquaintance happening to meet a lady. Indeed it was for this reason that I charged you in my note to come mounted upon that splendid steed which you manage so well, and on whose back you appear to such advantage. Mount then, I conjure you!"

The Minor Canon did not immediately obey the lady's injunction. He looked very hard at her with all the power of his searching eyes, as if to penetrate through the veil which concealed her countenance; and for a moment it was evident enough, by the expression which passed rapidly over his features, that he did not altogether like the strangeness of her behaviour, and that even some slight suspicion of intended evil had flitted across his mind. But apparently a second thought reassured him—or at least determined him to humour his fair companion; and he accordingly remounted the spirited steed, which for the last minute or two he had held by the bridle. Again, however, did he scan the lady from head to foot: and then he muttered to himself, "Yes, it is her figure. But surely it cannot be she?"

"What were you saying?" asked the lady, looking up at him through the folds of her veil.

"I was thinking," he answered, his eyes still fixed intently upon her, "that you remind me strangely of *another* lady whom I know well—and yet she is in deep mourning——"

"Oh! we will not talk of *other* ladies now," said the veiled unknown, somewhat petulantly, but still in a very subdued voice.

"Now listen to me," said Bernard Audley, in a resolute tone. "If all that your letter told me be true, I am highly flattered by its contents. In that note you say that for the last few days you have observed me riding on the parade and elsewhere—and that you have been struck by my appearance. This, I repeat, is most flattering—most complimentary. You tell me likewise in your note, that you wish me to meet you here soon after mid-day; and that I am to come on horseback, as if merely for a ride upon the cliffs. I have obeyed your summons—I am here. But now, wherefore for even the space of these few minutes that have elapsed since I joined you, preserve so much mystery?—why continue to wear that invidious veil over your features?—and why speak in subdued tones, as if you sought to disguise your voice. Before we proceed any farther together, do me the favour to lift your veil."

During the short space which the colloquy, so far as it went, had occupied, the lady had continued walking onward; and in so doing, she had approached nearer than at first to the edge of the cliffs, so that they were now within a dozen yards of the abyss.

"You would have me raise my veil," the lady now suddenly exclaimed, "in order that you may see my countenance? Behold it then!" she added in her natural voice; and flinging back her veil over her elegant bonnet, she revealed the features of Lilian Halkin.

"Ah!" ejaculated the Minor Canon: "for the last two or three minutes, I have not been altogether unprepared for this!"—and reining in his steed, he fixed his looks intently upon Lilian's countenance, as if he sought to fathom her purpose.

She also stopped short; and encountering his gaze with solemn seriousness of aspect, she said, "Bernard Audley, for the last time we meet—and I wish you to hear a few words from my lips ere we part for ever!"

"Well, speak then, Lilian," said the Minor Canon, scarcely able to conceal an expression of joy which rose to his features, at the idea of being thenceforth rid of the continual supervision of one whom he regarded as his evil genius. "But tell me," he immediately added, "is it in friendship or enmity that you have so cunningly contrived this meeting, which you say is to be our last?

Wherefore have you thrown aside your mourning?—was it the better to inveigle me hither to this interview?—or rather, I should ask, why all this preparation, precaution, and mystery at all? Since you found out where I was residing, wherefore did you not come direct to me at the hotel and speak to me there? Are your proceedings ever to be characterized by this sort of romantic mysticism which you doubtless think invests you with a kind of terrorism over me, so as to enable you to wield an influence upon all my actions? Speak Lilian—I await your explanations."

"I shall not detain you long," was the reply. "I have heard you patiently—it is now your turn to listen with equal attention to me—for this is the last time that you and I shall ever meet in this world. As I told you the other day in the Dane John, you consider me your evil genius: but for a long series of years have I loved you with all a woman's most enduring tenderness. But let that pass: I would speak of other things. Do you suppose that I am a stranger to the vile outrage which you attempted upon Louisa Stanley the other night, and which has made you, dreading the consequences, absent yourself from home for a time and come to Dover, so that in case of danger you may be near the French coast? Ah! you perceive, Bernard Audley, that I understand full well your motives in coming hither!"

"And what of that?" asked the Minor Canon impatiently. "But go on, Lilian; for I warn you that my horse will not stand quietly here for many minutes longer."

"Nor will I detain you many minutes," she rejoined quickly. "When you went to settle at Canterbury some eighteen months ago, and took up your abode in that old house which had so recently been a lunatic asylum, and had still some of the rooms fitted up in such a manner as to deaden the shrieks, and screams, and howlings of those who were once confined therein,—you are aware that I also came and settled in the same neighbourhood. You know likewise that in consequence of all that occurred in years past, I had vowed never to appear again in the presence of any of my family; but at the time when all those terrible calamities occurred—or rather soon after the fearful ordeal of prisonage and trial through which I passed—I secretly made inquiries relative to my sisters. I learnt that Melissa had died, leaving two children whose names were Clara and Louisa. Ah! you start—you begin to divine the truth? Well, and it is as you think. For not only did I discover that much; but I likewise ascertained that they had been taken by their aunt—my eldest sister Lydia—and borne away from London, no one knew whither. Now then, do you begin to understand how, when eighteen months ago circumstances brought me to Canterbury, I happened to learn that a lady having two nieces whose names were Clara and Louisa dwelt in a certain cottage under the name of Stanley, and how I was at once convinced that this lady was my sister and these damsels were Melissa's children? Ah! it was this circumstance which made me doubly watchful over Louisa's welfare and safety, when I found her the object of your unhallowed desires; and though I chose not to introduce myself as a relative to that young maiden, I nevertheless vowed to become her protecting genius. Bernard Audley, you now understand that it was my own niece—my dead sister's offspring—whom you would have basely sacrificed to your passion!"

"But I knew not of this relationship between you," exclaimed the Minor Canon, growing still more impatient than at first—especially as his steed was pawing the ground in a restless manner.

"No—you knew it not," said Lilian: "but even if you had been aware of the circumstance, it would not have stayed the wild career of your passions. Oh, man of infamy! hast thou no fear for the future—thou who makest such a bad use of the present? But the time for vengeance has arrived! Too long—Oh! far too long, have I endured your scorn, your indifference, perhaps even your hate—I who sacrificed everything and endured so much on your account! Yes, Bernard Audley—I now hate as much as I once loved; and when the love of a woman turns to hatred, it is bitterness indeed!"

"Lilian, you are mad. I leave you!" exclaimed the Minor Canon: and he endeavoured to wheel his horse round so as to gallop back over the heights.

But Lilian Halkin, with a wild cry, extended her arms suddenly, and rushed forward in such a manner that the steed started in affright and reared straight up. Then thrilled forth a still wilder cry from the lips of Bernard Audley, through whose brain flashed a harrowing sense of the fearful catastrophe that must ensue. Desperately did he dash his heels into the flanks of his steed in the hope of making him spring forward: but Lilian, now inspired with the malignant fury of a fiend, waved her white handkerchief before the eyes of the terrified animal, who backed suddenly and reared again. All this was the work of a few moments—and the next instant over they went, horse and man!

Terrific were the cries of both as they fell down the abyss; and Lilian, standing upon the very edge of the cliff, beheld the frightful fall. In another instant all was still—the catastrophe was accomplished—the steed and its master lay motionless upon the beach below.

Then Lilian Halkin turned away and fled precipitately. At a distance down the sloping eminences she met some persons, to whom with a real horror in her looks—for *this* there was no need to simulate—she declared that a terrible accident had just occurred. They descended by the shortest way to the beach, and there beheld the Minor Canon and the horse both dead and frightfully mangled. Lilian however remained at a distance; but when the persons rejoined her again, they told her she would have to give evidence at a Coroner's Inquest. This she did: and with a manner utterly defying suspicion that she herself had been the cause of the catastrophe, did she give a feasible version of the occurrence. The jury were satisfied—a verdict of *Accidental Death* was returned—and Lilian Halkin embarked for France.

On the morning which followed that of her departure, Miss Stanley received a letter containing these words:—

"My dear Lydia. "*Dover.*

"I am about to quit England for ever. Bernard Audley is no more! I beheld him perish in a manner that

will doubtless strike you as being fraught with retributive justice for the evil he has done me. It was a shocking accident that caused his death; and it was a strange chance that rendered *me* the spectatress thereof. The newspapers will furnish you with full particulars.

"At present I know not where I shall fix my abode, nor whether indeed I shall adopt any settled habitation at all. The agitation of my thoughts and the whirlwind which rages in my mind, appear only to be compatible with a wild erratic existence. But you shall hear from me occasionally; and as I must now be dependent upon you for my bread, I shall periodically let you know to what address you can forward me the trifle that will suffice for my wants. Had you continued poor, Lydia, I would sooner have begged my bread than have encroached upon your bounty; but as there is now wealth in the family, I hesitate not to crave the pittance which may sustain me.

"We shall never meet again, dear Lydia: but you and all who are dear to you, will constantly be present in my thoughts.

"Your affectionate sister,
"THE UNFORTUNATE LILIAN."

Thus was it that she kept her own secret respecting the real cause of Bernard Audley's horrible death: and thus was it also that no member of the family to which she belonged ever had to experience a sickening at the heart through the knowledge that Lilian was a murderess!

CHAPTER CXCIX.

THE GATHERING OF A STORM.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening, when the Hangman paid a visit to his friend Bencull at the den of infamy in Jacob's Island. On being admitted by the master of the place, Daniel Coffin said in a rough impatient tone, "Well, what's the matter? Is anything amiss? Why did you send up that pressing message just now to tell me to come down at once?"

"Can't you wait a minute or two till we are cozy in the back room together?" asked Bencull: "but you don't give a feller time even to shut the door."

Well, look sharp about it," said the Hangman: "'cause why, I don't like these sudden messages—they make one afraid."

The door being secured, the two ruffians passed into the back room, where Bencull at once produced pipes and a bottle of spirits.

"Now then, what is it all about?" demanded the Hangman.

"Why, I don't much like summut that I see this afternoon," answered Bencull. "There was that Buttoner feller talking to old Mother Franklin at the corner of the street where Mrs. Young lives——"

"Is that all?" asked the Hangman contemptuously. "Why shouldn't the Buttoner stop and chat with old Mother Franklin? Didn't he live for some time with Nell Gibson at Mrs. Young's? and isn't it natural enough then that he should look on Mother Franklin as an old acquaintance?"

"Well and good," responded Bencull: "but there's a great deal to be judged of by the manner of people, and also by any little word or two that one may catch accidentally."

"Go on and tell us what you mean without this round-about palaver:"—and as the Hangman spoke he tossed off a glass of gin.

"First of all," continued Bencull, "I saw that the Buttoner and Mother Franklin was talking in a very peculiar and confidential way, as if they had some matter of importance in hand. The Buttoner once or twice put his hand up to his head, and looked just for all the world like a chap that is full of remorse; and then Mother Franklin spoke to him with great earnestness as if trying to persuade him to tell her summut. So I watched the opportunity, got round behind 'em, and then sauntered up as if quite in a promiscuous way. They didn't see me till I was close upon them, and I heard them both mention the name of Nell Gibson."

"Ah! this does really then begin to look serious," observed the Hangman. "But what next?"

"When they saw me they both looked precious confused. The Buttoner stared at me in quite a suspicious way, just like a chap that means to peach. But that old wretch Mother Franklin immediately recovered her presence of mind; and taking a pinch of snuff, wagged her old jaws and said summut in what she meant to be a good-humoured way. I pretended not to have noticed anything queer, and very soon walked on. Then I at once came back home again, and sent the Durrynacker straight up to you. The Mushroom Faker called soon after; and I told him also what had happened. They are both coming back presently."

"But you don't think the Buttoner really means peaching?" asked Coffin, a diabolical expression settling upon his countenance.

"I have my fears, I can tell you," answered Bencull: "or else why the deuce should I have sent up for you, or told those fellers to come back again? Don't you recollect how the Buttoner behaved that night when we did Nell's business? The moment the gal was strangled, didn't the Buttoner suddenly burst into tears and cry like a child? Why, I recollect perfectly well you roared out to ask what the devil was the meaning of that blubbering——"

"Ah! and I recollect too, now you speak of it," interrupted the Hangman. "The Buttoner said it was only a sort of nervous fit that he could not help for the moment."

"Aye," added Bencull; "and he cried out for us to take her away and not let her stare up at him with her eyes that was fixed and dull as if made of glass; and he trembled all over with convulsions."

"So he did," remarked the Hangman; "and while you and me shoved the dead body over into the dyke, we were obliged to leave the Mushroom Faker and Bob the Durrynacker here to look after the Buttoner. But what has the Buttoner been doing ever since then? I don't think I have seen him more than once or twice——"

"For the last two or three months I hav'n't seen him at all," said Bencull, "until this afternoon. It's true I hadn't thought much about him, because he is often out on the tramp for several months together; but when he turned up in this queer way just now, and I saw him with old Mother Franklin, it made me feel just as if I was all of a sudden in Queer Street. I say, Dan'el, I

suppose you know pretty well that Mother Franklin doesn't like you a bit?"

"The old harridan!" growled the Hangman; "*she* wants to be tumbled over into the ditch. But I say, this is getting rather serious about the Buttoner——"

At this moment there was a knock at the street-door; and Bencull at once observed, "Here's the other coves."

He then proceeded to answer the summons, and speedily returned, accompanied by the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker.

The four ruffians now sat in solemn conclave to deliberate on the threatening aspect which affairs appeared to have assumed in respect to the murder of Nell Gibson. Several plans were discussed. The Mushroom Faker proposed that they should entice, or convey by force, both Mother Franklin and the Buttoner down to the crib and make away with them. Bob the Durrynacker suggested flight: but Bencull was inclined to support the Mushroom Faker's murderous project. The Hangman sat listening in silence to the deliberations that were thus going on.

"Well, why don't you say what you think?" asked Bencull. "Come, Dan'el, speak out."

"I hardly know what to decide upon," was his response. "As for bolting, that's altogether out of the question. I tell you what I will do," he added after a few moments' reflection, "I'll just toddle up to Mrs. Young's and see how things look there."

This suggestion was cordially approved of by his companions; and the Hangman accordingly proceeded forthwith to the neighbouring street where Mrs. Young dwelt. On arriving there, he was admitted by old Mother Franklin, who for a moment looked as if she were startled by his appearance; but immediately recovering herself, she said with a grin, "Well, Mr. Coffin, so you have come to see us again, eh? You don't desert us altogether. But it's a long time since you have been here. I don't think since Nell Gibson left us:"—and she looked very hard in the Hangman's face as she thus spoke.

"I have not had any business down this way since then," answered Coffin, whose features betrayed not the slightest indication of conscious guilt. "Is Mrs. Young in?"

"No, she be not," replied Mother Franklin. "But you can walk into the parlour, Mr. Coffin, and wait till she comes."

Thus speaking, the old woman threw open the door; and the Public Executioner passed into the room. He found no one there; and taking a seat, asked, "How long will Mrs. Young be before she comes back?"

"Not above half-an-hour or so," was Mother Franklin's response: then as she took a huge pinch of snuff from her box with an indecent picture on the lid, she said, "Will you take anything, Mr. Coffin?"

"That's one word for me and two for yourself," answered the Hangman, affecting a good-humoured smile. "Well, get some gin:"—and he flung half-a-crown upon the table.

The old woman sped forth to procure the liquor; and when she returned in about five minutes, Coffin said, "Now you shall mix two glasses, one for yourself and one for me. I don't know how it is, but I think I am no great favourite of your's—just because I chaffed you on one occasion."

"Yes—when you was here to see Nell Gibson," Mother Franklin hastened to add; and the quickness with which she spoke brought on a fit of coughing that nearly choked her and made the scalding rheum run down her wrinkled cheeks.

"Now then, old woman," observed the Hangman, "you will go out of the world in one of those shaky fits if you don't mind."

"Ah, well! I suppose my time ain't very far off," she replied, wagging her toothless jaws. "I am eighty-two come next Febiverry, and have had a pretty long run of it. Ah! and I have seen a many strange things too—a blessed many things, Mr. Coffin!"

"No doubt of it," he answered. "But come, let us drink to a better understanding betwixt us. I recollect I threw a shilling at you once and called you an old beldame. I was very wrong; but I only did it in fun. There's no harm in me—I am as innocent and as quiet as any lamb—though perhaps I don't look much like one."

Mother Franklin stared at him as if indeed she thought that he was very far from having a lamb-like appearance; and there was something in her look which Coffin did not fancy—for it seemed to confirm the dark suspicions which Bencull's information had already engendered.

"Howsomever," he continued, affecting a jocular mood, "if I flung you a shilling once and called you an old beldame, I now toss you a guinea and call you a dear good old creature."

He suited the action to the word with regard to the money; and Mother Franklin, taking it up, was evidently much rejoiced at so unexpected a present.

"Where's Mrs. Young gone?" asked the Hangman.

"I don't know," was the response. "She's on'y just stepped out a bit."

"Well, it struck me I saw her just now," remarked the Hangman, assuming a careless tone and look; "and I thought that the Buttoner was with her."

The statement he thus made was false: but he spoke in this manner in order to see what effect the mention of the Buttoner's name would have upon Mother Franklin.

"Very likely," she answered, taking another pinch of snuff.

"Oh! then the Buttoner *has* turned up again?" said the Hangman. "I have not seen him this long while. Where's he been?"

"I am sure I don't know," rejoined Mother Franklin, somewhat roughly; and she again looked very hard at the Public Executioner, as if to ascertain whether he had any sinister object in putting these questions.

"Ah! but I happen to know," proceeded Coffin, observing how she regarded him, and fully comprehending the nature of her scrutiny, so that his suspicion of something being wrong was now fully confirmed,—"I happen to know that he does speak pretty frankly to you."

"Well, I suppose that Bencull has told you he saw me and the Buttoner talking together this arternoon. But what of that?" asked the old woman. "I suppose that old acquaintances may stop and chat if they like."

"How you are going on," interrupted the Hangman, affecting to laugh. "Why, of course old acquaintances will talk; and I suppose that as I am an old acquaintance also, there is no harm in my asking about the Buttoner in a friendly way. I always thought he was a good fellow, and was glad to hear he had come back to London again. Will he be here to-night?"

"I can't say," replied Mother Franklin.

"But he did go out with Mrs. Young—didn't he now?"

"No," she returned; "he did not:"—and though she looked with bold hardihood in the Hangman's face, he nevertheless saw right well that his random assertion had conveyed a truth and that the Buttoner had actually gone out with Mrs. Young.

"Well then," he rejoined, "I can positively declare that I saw them together."

"And what if you did?" demanded Mother Franklin: "it's no business of mine, or of your'n either. What's it got to do with us? I suppose you don't care where the Buttoner goes, or who he goes with."

"Not a fig," answered the Hangman: then having taken a long draught of gin-and-water, he said with apparent carelessness of manner, "By the bye, any news of Nell Gibson? I wonder what the deuce has become of that gal. What made her bolt, do you think, from this place? She didn't owe your missus any money—did she?"

"Not a farthing. She had plenty of money—as I dare say you very well know:"—and Mother Franklin nodded significantly at the Public Executioner.

"Yes: there had been some little affairs—the Shooter's Hill business for instance—which had put some money into all our pockets, and Nell had her share. But you haven't told me whether anything has been heard of her?"

"How should I know?" asked Mother Franklin snappishly. "Nell was no favourite of mine. She used to give herself precious airs towards me; and——But no matter! I don't bear the poor thing any more ill-will, wherever she is."

"Isn't it strange," asked the Hangman, totally unabashed, "that nothing's been heard of her for so long?"

"Very strange indeed," answered Mother Franklin. "The last night I ever saw her I remember I was uncommon lushy, and she said some cutting things to me. The Buttoner came to fetch her away; and she never returned no more."

"Where did he take her to?" asked Coffin, looking as innocent as his hang-dog countenance would permit him.

"Ah! that's more than I can say. If I had known at the time I should have gone and inquired after her when I found that she didn't come back."

"Well, I suppose now that you have seen the Buttoner again, you have asked him what became of Nell?"—and Daniel Coffin once more looked very hard in Mother Franklin's face.

At this moment the street-door was heard to open, evidently by means of a latch-key; and Mother Franklin observed, "Here's missus:"—having said which she went forth very hurriedly into the passage, as if to give some warning, or intercept Mrs. Young and the person who had just entered with her: for that the mistress of the house *had* returned with a companion, was apparent from the sounds of two persons' footsteps in the passage.

The Hangman, instantaneously suspecting that Mrs. Young's companion was the Buttoner, and recognising in Mother Franklin's sudden disappearance a farther proof that treachery was intended, lost no time in following her into the passage: and there, sure enough, he beheld the paramour of the murdered Nell Gibson. There was a light in the passage—and the Hangman's countenance was seen to grow instantaneously diabolic in its expression: but in a moment mastering his rage, he extended his hand to the Buttoner, saying, "Ah, old fellow! I heard that you had come back. How do you find yourself?"

The man, who had a very miserable and downcast aspect—as if a load of care were upon his mind—said, "I can't shake hands with you, Coffin: I have something *here* that won't let me:"—and he placed his hand upon his heart.

"What the devil does all this mean?" growled the Hangman, not knowing exactly what to do or whether to resent this conduct on the part of the Buttoner: but the next moment, thinking it best to take his departure, he exclaimed, "Come, stand aside and let me be off. I see very well that I am not wanted here!"

But the Buttoner placed his back against the street-door, saying, "You can't go:"—and at the same moment both Mrs. Young and Mother Franklin seized upon the Public Executioner like two tiger-cats,—the elder woman, despite her great age, being if anything the more ferocious of the two.

For an instant the Hangman was overpowered in that narrow passage: but the next moment he burst away from the two women, dashing Mrs. Young into the parlour, and trampling old Mother Franklin under his feet. Their cries were horrible: and now the Buttoner sprang at the Hangman, threw his arms round his neck, and clung to him with the tenacity of a boa-constrictor. They fell, struggling desperately, in the passage, and several females who belonged to the house of ill-fame, being alarmed by the noise, came rushing down the stairs, some in a state of more than semi-nudity. Without comprehending the motive which led to the attack upon the Hangman, but zealous in taking the part of the mistress of the place, they at once precipitated themselves upon Coffin, against whom Mrs. Young was levelling the most horrible menaces.

But the Hangman was not yet overpowered: he possessed a lion's strength, and was now as desperate as the maddened beast itself when the hunters hold it at bay. With one tremendous effort he shook off the female furies who had pounced upon him—released himself from the grasp of the Buttoner—and with the iron heel of his great thick boot dealt that individual such a blow that left him senseless upon the floor, where he lay. Another instant and the Hangman's hand was upon the latch of the street-door: but again did the females from up-stairs dart upon him, while Mrs. Young herself re-appeared from the parlour, armed with the poker.

Through the posse of furies rushed the Hangman, scattering them in the passage as a bull dashes aside right and left a crowd when careering through it; and in another moment the for-

midable weapon was wrenched from Mrs. Young's hand. Then striking all about at random—thus doing serious injury, and even breaking bones—the Hangman regained the front door, sprang forth, and hurried away as quickly as his legs would carry him.

His ideas being all in confusion, he instinctively sped in the direction of Jacob's Island; but as he neared that spot the thought suddenly struck him that there might be danger there. He accordingly turned aside—took another direction—gained London Bridge—traversed it—and reaching the City, hastened along towards Fleet Lane.

But while pursuing his way, his ideas began to settle themselves in his mind; and it struck him that if there were danger for him at Jacob's Island, there might be likewise peril at his own house:—that is to say, if the Buttoner had peached and the constables were on the look-out, he would stand the same chance of being arrested in Fleet Lane as at Bencull's crib. He stopped short and stood irresolute how to act. He felt as if the crisis of his destiny were at hand. What could he do? The very worst was to be apprehended. Every thing seemed to indicate that the Buttoner had already peached relative to Nell Gibson's murder—or that he meant to do so. Else why should he and the women have sought to detain him?

The Hangman turned into one of the narrow streets leading down towards Cripplegate; and entering a low boozing-ken, he went into the public room, sat down, and called for liquor and a pipe. No one besides himself happened to be in the room at the time; and he was glad to have this opportunity of deliberating seriously upon the course which he should pursue. Taking a draught of the liquor which was provided, and lighting his pipe, he set himself to think. But his reflections brought no comfort. Dangers stared him in the face; and he who had twined the halter around the neck of so many, now felt as if it were twining around his own.

He thought of flying from London: but whither could he go? He knew full well that it would be difficult to disguise himself, and that if a hue and cry were raised, his recognition would be inevitable. Besides, he did not happen to have much money in his pocket at the time; and he was well aware how impossible it was to get on without a plentiful supply of the needful. He determined therefore to stay in London, at least until the morrow; and while revolving in his mind the different places where he thought he might lie hid, he remembered Taggarty's chandlery-shop on Mutton-Hill, Clerkenwell.

Issuing forth from the boozing-ken, he was proceeding in the direction of Clerkenwell, when he suddenly recollected the disinclination which Taggarty had evinced to harbour him on that occasion when he called there and met Sally and Dick Melmoth after his escape from drowning in the Thames at the time of the burglary at Mrs. Owen's.

"Bill Taggarty," he said to himself, "wouldn't have me then; and it's no use my going to him now. And yet he is very friendly with Dick and Sally—he brought them up, as one may say, when he was the Kinchin Grand—and therefore he wouldn't mind going and letting them know that I have got into trouble and must see one of them as soon as possible."

Therefore, without any farther hesitation, the Hangman pursued his way towards Mutton Hill; and shortly entered the little chandlery-shop kept by William Taggarty.

This individual was seated in the small parlour behind the shop: but the moment the glazed door communicating with the street opened and the little bell tinkled, Taggarty came forth.

"Hullo, Dan'el! is that you?" said the chandler, who, not knowing that anything was wrong, now seemed tolerably cordial in his welcome, although the Hangman was no great favourite of his; but it suited his purpose to keep on as good terms as possible with all those persons who were acquainted with his antecedents.

"Yes—it's me as large as life, Bill," returned the Hangman. "But let's step inside into your parlour, for I want to talk to you a bit."

Into the little room behind the shop did Taggarty accordingly lead the way; and producing his gin-bottle and glasses, he sat down, the Hangman already having thrown himself upon a seat.

"Is anything the matter?" asked the chandler, now observing that there was a certain degree of trouble in Coffin's looks.

"Well, I can't say things are quite as right as they should be," responded the Hangman. "But when do you usually shut up this shop of yours?"

"About ten: but to-night, being Saturday, I keep it open until twelve."

"Well, it's just close upon twelve now," observed Coffin; "and so I suppose you can shut up at once, can't you?"

"Do you want me to do anything for you?" asked Taggarty.

"Yes—I don't exactly feel it convenient to go home," rejoined Coffin; "and therefore I want you to run down and tell Sal that she must come up and see me at once."

"What, in the middle of the night?" exclaimed the chandler. "Then there *must* be really summut very unpleasant that's occurred?"

"In plain terms, Bill," said the Hangman, "I am afraid that the traps are after me."

"What for?—some new affair?" asked Taggarty.

"Oh! I will tell you all about it when you come back. You go and fetch Sally or Dick: but I would rather have Sally of the two."

"By the bye, what's become of Jack the Foundling?" inquired the chandler, as he rose from his seat and put on his hat to depart on the errand now entrusted to him.

"Oh! he's been out of my hands a long time," answered Coffin, "and I don't know what the deuce has become of him. He got well nigh killed on Westminster bridge seven or eight months ago—it's too long a story to tell now—and was taken to a surgeon's close in the neighbourhood where the accident occurred; and ever since then I have lost all trace of him. But don't let us wait to chatter: you cut down to Fleet Lane and make Sal come up shortly. On second thoughts, she had better not come with you or yet take a direct course: and if she should think there is any body on the watch dogging her steps, then she mustn't come here at all, but must go quite in another direction so as to put them off their scent. Now then, Bill, do you understand? and will you manage this thing cleverly, as you know how to do it if you like?"

"I will, Dan'el," returned the chandler; and he forthwith took his departure.

An hour elapsed, during which the Hangman experienced the most feverish anxiety, which was moreover artificially stimulated by the deep inroads he made upon Taggarty's gin bottle. He frequently gnashed his teeth with rage, or clenched his fist and struck it forcibly upon the table. Often too, during that hour, did he go and listen at the street door to hear if footsteps were approaching. The clock of Clerkenwell Church proclaimed one, and still Taggarty did n t return: what could be keeping him? If he went quick he need not be more than ten minutes going, and the like time for coming back, which would leave him forty minutes to stop and talk in Fleet Lane! Surely then he ought to be back by this time. Was Taggarty capable of betraying him? No—the Hangman rejected that idea. Why then did he not return?

At length, about ten minutes past one, the chandler made his appearance. His looks were haggard and frightened; and Coffin at once saw that he had obtained some evil intelligence.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded, in a voice expressive of the most poignant impatience.

"There's a terrible smash," was Taggarty's reply. "Bencull, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker, are all three arrested: and the officers have been to Fleet Lane——"

"Malediction!" ejaculated the Hangman, in a low but terrible voice of concentrated rage. "What else, Bill? Go on—tell me everything."

"It appears that the Buttoner has peached and all particulars about Nell Gibson is known. You had better be off, Dan'el, as quick as ever you can. Sally will meet you in two hours down at old Jeremy Humpage's in Whitechapel."

"What on earth made her fix upon that place?" cried the Hangman. "She ought to know very

well that old Jeremy won't open his house at such a time of night—or rather in the morning; and that even if it was the middle of the day, he wouldn't like to receive a visit from me when I am in trouble. It would be all very well if I had a lot of things to dispose of—plate or jewellery, or what not——"

"Well, but Sally says you *must* make the old man let you in, and nobody will think of looking for you there. You couldn't go to Joe Parkes's on Saffron Hill close by here; nor yet to Meg Blowen's in the Almonry: Sharp Mawley's in the Mint is done up; and Polly Scratchem in Whitechapel is no friend of your'n: so Sally was bewildered, and thought it best for you to go at once to old Jeremy's."

"Well, and I don't know but what after all it's the best dodge," observed the Hangman. "But what the deuce made you so long?"

"Why, Sally had gone over to Jacob's Island to give you a hint that Larry's men had been to Fleet Lane; and she hadn't come back when I called. So Dick begged me to wait, and I did. But pray don't delay any longer: I might have been followed for anything I know; though I don't think I was, for I kept a sharp look out as I came along."

The Hangman tossed off another glass of gin-and-water, to cheer his spirits, as he said; and then, having thanked Taggarty for his kindness, took his departure.

CHAPTER CC.

THE OLD FENCE'S ABODE.

In one of the narrowest, dirtiest, and most pestilential streets of that maze of squalor, wretchedness, and demoralization known as Whitechapel, the habitation of Jeremy Humpage was situated. It consisted of two houses thrown into one: for the old man ostensibly carried on the business of second-hand clothes' dealer; but his real occupation was that of receiver of stolen goods. Indeed, as set forth in an early part of this narrative, he was an inveterate "fence:" but he generally managed matters so cunningly as to escape the meshes of the law.

His profits were immense; and he had correspondents upon the Continent by whose aid he carried on a considerable portion of his illicit commerce. For instance, when a robbery of bank-notes for large amounts was accomplished and payment of them was stopped at the Bank of England, Humpage would purchase them of the thieves; and the instant they fell into his possession he would despatch them to his correspondents in Holland or France, where they were immediately passed into circulation. Or again, if diamonds or other precious stones of very large value came into his possession, these were also sent off to the Continent, where they were readily disposed of. Nor was this all the service which his foreign correspondents rendered him: but inasmuch as he purchased his goods at one-twentieth part of their real value, he was enabled to make constant shipments of large quantities of articles, the impost of Continental tariffs still leaving him a very large margin for profit.

The reader will therefore understand how it was that Mr. Jeremy Humpage required a somewhat large establishment; and he had several persons in his employment. But these individuals did not dwell in his habitation: his old housekeeper—a woman nearly of his own age—was the only individual who slept on the premises besides himself.

On the particular night, however, of which we are writing, Jeremy Humpage had a friend with him. This was his agent and accomplice, the Swag Chovey Bloak—another "fence" whose acquaintance the reader may remember to have made at Bencull's crib the first time that it was introduced to his notice.

It was now past two o'clock in the morning—the Sabbath morning too—and the Swag Chovey Bloak was still closetted with Jeremy Humpage in a back room of the establishment in Whitechapel. But of very peculiar construction and arrangements was this back room. The window was entirely boarded up, with merely two circular holes about four inches in diameter towards the top for the purpose of letting in the fresh air. The door of this room fitted so exactly into the wainscotted passage whence it opened, and was so minutely uniform with the other part of the woodwork, that not even the keenest observer would have noticed, when in the passage, that it was a door at all. No hinges were visible—no crevices nor creases which might trace the outline of a door: nor was there any handle, latch, or lock to be seen. The hinges were invisible; and the door opened by means of a secret spring. The interior of the room showed a floor, walls, and ceiling blackened with smoke. There was a large furnace, with a melting pot fixed over a grating to which a pair of bellows were so adjusted as to enable any one standing by to sustain an incessant fanning of the fire under that grating. A table and three or four chairs constituted the furniture.

In this room it was that, at two o'clock on the Sunday morning, we now find old Jeremy Humpage and his friend the Swag Chovey Bloak. There was wine upon the table—and not only wine, but also a tray containing the materials for an excellent repast, as well as two or three dishes of the summer fruits then in season. For old Jeremy was regaling himself and his friend on the strength of a most lucrative transaction which they had concluded a few hours back. This was nothing more nor less than a purchase of a large quantity of plate that had been stolen from some rich person's house; and as initials and armorial bearings were engraven on every article of the plunder, the melting pot was gradually fusing the whole into a solid mass.

Jeremy and his friend were chatting gaily—drinking their wine, as they watched the melting process—and taking it by turns to work the bellows. Suddenly a sharp ring was heard at the street-door. By the light of the candles as well as by that of the candescent charcoal under the melting pot, the two fences gazed upon each other with troubled looks: for notwithstanding the admirable precautions taken to conceal the laboratory where their operations were going on, their consciences were not sufficiently pure to guarantee them against the sudden alarm which this imperious ringing at such an hour was so well calculated to excite.

The old housekeeper had for some hours past been in bed: but even if she were up, she would not have been permitted to open the door at that time

of night—or rather morning. Old Jeremy therefore rose from his seat—took one of the candles—and issuing forth from the room, carefully closed the mysterious door behind him. Descending the stairs, he drew back the bolts of the front door, but left the chain still up, so that when open to the width of a foot, it was still safely secured against any intruder.

"Let me in, Mr. Jeremy—let me in," said a female voice. "I wish to speak to you particularly."

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"Don't you know me—Sally Melmoth?" was the response.

"Ah! Daniel Coffin's friend! But what do you want?"

"I cannot speak here—and it is important. Let me in."

Jeremy Humpage hesitated no longer; but letting go the chain, gave the woman admittance: then closing the door, he replaced the chain and shot the bolts back into their sockets. Having done this, he led the way into a little parlour on the ground-floor; and placing the light upon the table, awaited the explanation which the woman had to give for this unseasonable visit.

"Mr. Humpage, pray don't be angry with me," she began; "but I am in very great trouble——"

"Trouble!" he immediately ejaculated, trembling all over: "then what on earth do you come to me for? You know very well that I can't help you. But what sort of trouble is it? Something about Daniel Coffin, I suppose. Why, that man was born to get into trouble. What chances, what opportunities he has had! What business we have done together! — and yet somehow or other he is always running into scrapes."

"But since you have done so much business with him," observed Sally Melmoth, "won't you give him your advice? To tell you the truth—relying on your friendship, I have made an appointment for him to come and meet me here——"

"Come here?" actually screamed the old man, his shrivelled form shaking from head to foot, and continuing to tremble as if with the palsy—while he went on to say in a sharp querulous tone, "What an hour to make an appointment at a person's house! I won't have it—I can't have it——"

"But it is done—the appointment is made," said Sally Melmoth; "and it's too late to alter it. I must wait for him here."

"When will he come? when will he come?" asked the old man nervously.

"In about half-an-hour or so," was the response. "I walked quicker than usual, and therefore got here sooner than I expected. Come, Mr. Jeremy, pray don't look so cross about it: we shall do you no harm—and surely Daniel has put enough things in your way at different times to induce you to show him this little civility."

"Well, well, I don't know but what you say is true enough," observed the ancient fence, somewhat softened. "But it must be a very bad case indeed for Daniel to make his appointments *here*. It shows as if all his usual haunts and wonted cribs had become too hot to hold him. Come, tell me frankly, Sal, what is the matter?"

"Why, you know Nell Gibson——"

"Ah! she disappeared in a strange way some time ago. What about her?"

"It's just for that disappearance that Daniel's in trouble," answered Sal: "and moreover, there's a precious break-up down at the Folly Bridges——"

"At Bencull's?" asked the old man.

"Yes. But hark! there's Daniel!" she exclaimed, as the bell rang.

Old Humpage took up the light and went to open the door. In less than a minute he returned to the parlour, followed by the Hangman, whose grim countenance expanded into a sort of smile of satisfaction on beholding Sally Melmoth: for he was just now in that desperate situation when such a proof of fidelity on her part was calculated to touch his stony heart.

"Now you can talk over matters together," said Jeremy, "and I will come back to you in half-an-hour."

"Very good," said the Hangman: and when the old fence had quitted the room, he drew his chair close up to Sally Melmoth, saying, "Now tell me all about it."

"I don't know how it was," began the woman, "but when Bencull sent up for you this evening I thought there was something wrong, and I was very dull and miserable after you went out. It was half-past seven when you left, and Dick was gone out. So there I was left all alone, to mope by myself, till the blues came over me. At about ten Dick came back; and finding me so miserable, he would make me take some spirits. Well, he and I were just sitting down to a comfortable glass, when a knock was heard at the door; and on Dick's opening it, in walked three of Mr. Sampson's men. Of course they wouldn't believe us when we declared that you wasn't in; and they searched the whole place. We asked what was the matter: but they would not tell us—they were as mum as mice. At length, being satisfied that you was not there, they went away. As soon as they were gone and I thought the coast was clear, I stole out and cut across to the Folly Bridges as quick as my legs would carry me. But when I got down to Bencull's, the place was all shut up and no light to be seen. Three or four groups of people were however talking together in low whispers in Mill Street; and I went up to one party and asked what was the matter. Then they told me that Mr. Lawrence Sampson, with a lot of his men, had suddenly invaded Bencull's house—some getting in by the gallery behind, and others bursting open the street door. They took Bencull, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker prisoners, and hurried them away. But one of the constables, who, it seems, had watched in the street while the capture was being made, told the inhabitants who came out of the neighbouring houses, that it was on account of the murder of a gal named Nell Gibson, and that one of the chaps engaged in it had peached. I likewise heard the people say that Daniel Coffin was in it, and that the officers were looking after him."

"That scoundrel the Buttoner!" growled the Hangman, in a low tone of condensed ferocity. "By Satan! I wouldn't mind swinging if I could only be revenged on him."

"Oh, don't talk in that horrid manner, Daniel!" exclaimed Sally Melmoth, crying.

"Well, go on," he observed. "What did you do next?"

"I hastened back from the Folly Bridges as

quick as ever I could to Fleet Lane," she continued, wiping her eyes; "and there I found Taggarty. I didn't know where to make an appointment to meet you; but I thought that this place would be the best—and I'll tell you why. Because," continued the young woman, "Larry Sampson knows very well how prudent, and cautious, and particular in all his doings old Jeremy is; and he would no more think of looking for you beneath this roof than in the King's palace. There will be a precious hue and cry to-morrow—or rather presently, for the new day has begun already some time: and you must lay up in lavender as close as ever you can, till the storm has so far blown over that you can get away to France."

"What then do you propose?—that I should stay here for a while?" asked the Hangman, evidently well pleased with the suggestion. "But old Jeremy won't allow it——"

"Nonsense, Daniel! how can he prevent it?" exclaimed Sally Melmoth. "You tell him you *must* stay here for a day or two—and then when once he is implicated in concealing you at all, even for a few hours, he won't dare turn round upon you, because he would be getting himself into trouble for having harboured you. Besides, a miserable timid old man like him, that you can blow out of existence with a breath, won't dare oppose *your* will. So you can force yourself upon him, and he must do his best to conceal you."

"Trust a woman for ready wit and invention!" exclaimed the Hangman. "You argue like a philosopher, Sal; and your advice shall be adopted. But I say, are you sure that you wasn't followed, coming up here just now?"

"I am sure of it," answered Sally,—"at least as sure as a person well could be in such a case. But tell me—is there anything you want done?"

"Nothing particular at present. You had better not come near me again for some days, 'cause why a watch is sure to be set upon your movements. If I want to communicate with you, it shall be through old Humpage. So now you understand; and if Larry Sampson or any of his people call, mind you pretend that you hav'n't the slightest idea where the deuce I can be."

"Trust me for that," answered Sally Melmoth.

Jeremy Humpage now returned to the room, saying, "Well, my good friends, have you had your little talk out? I suppose you are ready to go now: for I must think of retiring to bed."

"I tell you what it is, friend Humpage," responded the Hangman: "I am going to sponge upon your kindness till night comes on again——"

"What! stay here?" screamed the old man. "Impossible! impossible!"—and he shivered from head to foot.

"Now come, don't be inhospitable," said the Hangman soothingly. "If you was in trouble, and came to Fleet Lane, saying, '*My dear Mr. Coffin, I rely upon your courtesy and friendship*;' or some such-like gentlemanly terms, you would receive a noble reception. So I expect the same from you."

"But, my good friend," remonstrated Jeremy, "you know that I never mix myself up in the concerns of others; and this too," he added with a visible shudder, "is so very, very serious."

"Come, don't you pretend to be a saint," interrupted the Hangman, with a return of his wonted gruffness of manner; "that dodge won't do. What the devil are you thinking of? To turn me out here at three o'clock in the morning, just when it is getting light? Why, I should be grabbed up directly."

"Well," observed Humpage, liking the present adventure as little as might be, "if it's only the matter of a few hours, of course I cannot be so cruel as to refuse. But on the positive understanding that when night comes again——"

"To be sure! I shall only be too glad to be safe off," cried the Hangman: but he darted a significant look at Sally Melmoth, as much as to say that now he was once safely installed beneath the old man's roof, he should not take his departure until it fully suited his convenience.

To be brief, Sally bade her paramour farewell, and issued forth on her way back to Fleet Lane. Old Jeremy then conducted the Hangman to a bedroom; and having seen him commence his preparations for retiring to rest, he went back to the laboratory in order to rejoin his friend the Swag Chovey Bloak.

As soon as the Hangman found himself alone, he stopped in the midst of taking off his garments; and sitting down upon the truckle-bedstead in the sordid little chamber to which he had been conducted, began meditating very seriously upon the circumstances of his position. His guilty conscience was naturally prone to conjure up a thousand terrors, akin to those which had arisen in his mind while alone at Taggarty's, but which had been allayed, or at all events temporarily absorbed, by the excitement of the walk from Mutton Hill to Whitechapel, and also so long as he was in the society of his mistress Sally Melmoth. But now that he was plunged into the solitude of this miserable chamber—without a soul to speak to, and without even a drop of spirits to give him an artificial stimulant—he rapidly fell into despondency; and a myriad phantoms of evil rose up in his active imagination.

What if Sally Melmoth was to betray him? She had hitherto been faithful to him for some years and through many vicissitudes: but he had frequently made her the victim of his brutality, and when anything thwarted him, had vented his spite upon her. Then her brother Dick, too, had also been compelled to put up with his coarse invectives, and even with his blows; and being of so treacherous and vindictive a character himself, the Hangman naturally dreaded to find treachery and revenge in others. He had a considerable sum of money concealed at his house in Fleet Lane; and though he had ever most studiously avoided giving any hint either to his mistress or her brother of this circumstance, yet they *must* know that he *had* money, the proceeds of the many desperate but lucrative matters in which he had been engaged: and what if they were, under present circumstances, to institute a search for it, now that he was compelled to absent himself from his dwelling?

These reflections began to torture the Hangman most poignantly—most goadingly; and in the solitude of that little chamber, he clenched his fist and gnashed his teeth with rage. Then he endeavoured to console himself, as men will do in such cases, by conjuring up every argument he could possibly think of in favour of the fidelity of Sally

Melmoth and her brother. On former occasions when he had been in trouble, were they not always faithful?—and on this present occasion had not Sally Melmoth done her best to seek him out at Jacob's Island and give him timely warning? and had she not wept too just now in his presence? Ah! all that was well and good: but the Hangman felt that *he* also would play the hypocrite where he meant to become the traitor, and that *he* would lull into a false security any individual whom he intended to make a victim.

Now that his fears were so terribly active, they speedily took a wider range; and he thought to himself that even if Sally Melmoth and her brother Dick should prove faithful, what guarantee had he for similar fidelity on the part of Jeremy Humpage?

"The old villain," said the Hangman to himself, "knows that it is all up with me now, so far as continuing in London is concerned: he is aware that I can never be of any service to him again, and that I shall bring nothing more to his melting-pot. Then, what regard can he have for me? Everybody knows that these cursed old fences are the most treacherous scoundrels in existence, and often send their pals, when completely done up and no longer useful to the scaffold, just as a landowner sends his worn-out labourers to the workhouse. Besides, when I come to think of it, what possible fear can old Jeremy stand in of me? If he gave me up to justice and I was to turn round upon him, denouncing him as an old fence, I should only be telling what Larry Sampson and every constable in London know very well already. But the proof—aye, the proof—that's it. For to show that he *is* a receiver of stolen goods, something that has been stolen must be found on his premises. Of course old Jeremy knows all this, and is well aware that he is not in my power: he is too wide awake to be in the power of anybody. Then why shouldn't he give me up? He is endangering himself by letting me stay here: *this* really would put him in the reach of the law. There's another thing too:—perhaps old Jeremy wouldn't mind propitiating Larry Sampson by such an important service as handing me over to his keeping? Yes—by Satan! I am surrounded by dangers. In fact, I feel as if my case was desperate; it's a sort of crisis—I know it is—I am sure of it. Was there ever a fellow who had done such things as I have, that didn't get sold by his frends at last—either by his mistress or his pals? And there is Bill Taggarty too—he knows that I am here; and he is such a miserable sneaking coward that if it was known I had been to his place at all, and Larry Sampson went and questioned him about it, he is just as likely as not to et the cat out of the bag at once and send Larry down her to look for me. Malediction! I can't stay here; and yet were the deuce am I to go, with scarcely any money in my pocket?"

I From these reflections which the Hangman made to himself, the reader will comprehend the troubled state of his mind. It was therefore utterly impossible that he could lie down quietly and think of composing himself to rest. He suffered no remorse on account of his crimes—no, not even for that blackest one of all, the consequences of which had gathered the present storm over his head. But if he knew not the compunction of his tremendous guilt, he at all events experienced its terrors; and now was he chafing in that little chamber like a wounded lion in its den.

Suddenly an idea struck him—an idea which was but too consonant with the desperate character of this fiend in human shape! What if he were to lay violent hands upon Humpage—ransack the old man's coffers—take possession of everything in the shape of money or valuables which he could find—disguise himself in some of the clothing from the establishment's ample store—and then sally forth, even in the broad daylight, in the hope of escaping safe and sound out of the metropolis? For it was broad daylight now.

This plan the Public Executioner speedily fixed upon: but ere he stole forth from his chamber, he lingered to settle beforehand the mode of procedure. He knew that the old housekeeper was ordinarily the only inmate of the dwelling besides Humpage himself; and he thought it would be better to dispose of her first ere he carried his fearful scheme into execution against her master. He had murderous weapons about him—more than sufficient to enable him to overcome a decrepid old woman and an aged man, even if he found them both awake in their respective chambers and they were to offer resistance: he had his crowbar, his clasp-knife, and his pistols. But the puzzle was, where were those chambers? how could he find out in which room the housekeeper slept, and in which Jeremy Humpage? If he went wandering about the dwelling at a venture, he might be seen—his design would be suspected—windows might be thrown up and an alarm raised, before he could possibly silence the two old people for ever. How then was he to proceed?

"Trust to the chapter of accidents," said the Hangman to himself; "for I can't very well make my position more desperate than it is—whereas I may contrive to improve it."

The villain! though now menaced by all the frightful consequences of murder, he hoped to improve his condition by other murders!

The morning, as we have already hinted, had fully dawned, and it was quite light inside his chamber. His countenance had a more than usually horrible appearance: it was ghastly with the terrors that he had so recently been conjuring up, and by the evil passions which were agitating in his mind. This ghastliness was enhanced by the unshorn condition of his beard, which blackened all the lower part of his countenance; while a sinister light, such as that of the reptile, vibrated in his eyes, gleaming from beneath his dark overhanging brows. Taking the pistols from his pocket, he assured himself that they were loaded, and put fresh priming in the pan of each. Having restored them to his capacious pockets, he took out his clasp-knife—opened it—and tried the point: then did a grim smile of terrible satisfaction appear upon his features; and as he raised his eyes he caught the reflection of himself in a little mirror suspended to the wall. The man actually started, as if that mirror were a window through which a fiend was looking in upon him: for he never felt—vile as he knew his aspect to be—that it was so utterly diabolical as at that moment.

His plan being settled, his mind made up, and his weapons duly prepared for any emergency, he took off his great clumsy lace-up boots, and opened the door with the noiselessness of an accomplished

burglar. The passage with which the chamber communicated was lighted by a window at the end; and Coffin perceived that four doors opened from it, of which that of his own chamber was one. A dead silence prevailed throughout the dwelling—or at least no sound of any kind met his ears. Stealing out into the passage, the Hangman tried the door of the chamber adjoining his own: it opened—he looked in—but no one was there. It at once struck him that this must be old Humpage's room: for there were several articles of clothing lying about, evidently belonging to him. But the bed had not been slept in all night. Perhaps the old man had for some reason sought another chamber: and yet the Executioner could not exactly settle his mind to this belief—for his keen eye caught sight of a night-shirt and cotton night-cap lying at the foot of the bed, as if in readiness for their owner's use. Without however pausing to reflect much longer upon the matter, Coffin was about to issue forth and examine the other chambers, when his acute ear suddenly caught the sounds of footsteps advancing, as if with tiptoe caution, along the passage. Not a moment did he deliberate how to act, but at once concealed himself under the bed: for he thought it best to ascertain if possible who were about the house at that hour, ere he made any attempt in pursuance of his murderous purpose.

Scarcely was he ensconced underneath the bed, when the door, which he had left ajar, was opened, and two persons (as he judged by their footsteps) entered the room. Still as death he lay in his place of concealment; and when the two individuals who had thus entered began to converse, although it was in low whispers, he nevertheless had not the slightest difficulty in recognising the voices of Jeremy Humpage and the Swag Chovey Bloak.

CHAPTER CCI.

THE HANGMAN'S PROCEEDINGS.

It appeared to the Public Executioner that he heard one of the individuals put a key in a lock and open a door which grated on its hinges. His supposition was correct. It was Jeremy Humpage opening an iron safe, which was let into the wall of his bed-chamber.

"Well, my dear friend," said the old man, in his nervous trembling voice, "since we have agreed upon the value of the swag, all I have got to do is to give you your share. Thirds, you know—you take thirds in these matters."

"That's right enough," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak, "as a general rule: but——"

"Dear me, my worthy and excellent friend," interrupted old Jeremy, "pray don't look discontented! You can't conceive how I hate the word *but!* Besides, I thought just now, before we left the secret room, that you were quite contented to take your usual share of the value of all that plate?"

"Well, but this job is different from the rest," rejoined the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a tone of remonstrance. "Recollect——"

"Hush, hush, my dear friend!" said Jeremy Humpage. "Bear in mind I told you that scoundrel Coffin is in the next room to this; and as he mightn't be asleep, it is possible he may hear us. Speak low therefore—speak low: he's deuced suspicious."

"Well," resumed the other fence, "as I was going to observe, you should recollect that this is the largest and best business I have ever put in your way yet, long as we have been connected together. Here's a matter of at least four hundred pound worth of plate that you gave sixty pound for; and now that it's all gone nice and comfortable through the melting-pot, and you are safe to sell the lump of silver in Holland for three hundred pound——"

"Granted, granted!" interrupted old Jeremy with some little degree of impatience. "So, deducting the sixty that I gave for it, we will reckon the gain to be two hundred and forty—the third of which is exactly eighty pounds; and that is what I am going to give you——"

"You ought to make it a hundred—a cool hundred," interrupted the Swag Chovey Bloak; "and then I shall be quite satisfied."

"Say ninety, and it shall be a bargain," whispered old Humpage, his words hissing like a hideous reptile. "Only think, my dear friend—ninety pounds in good gold and bank notes! and you to have it all at once, while I have got to wait till my agent Bekerlynck at the Hague disposes of the lump of silver and remits me the proceeds!"

"Well, come: we wont stand haggling here," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a somewhat surly tone. "The morning is advancing; and besides, you know where I have got to go and what I have got to do——"

"Yes, yes," observed Jeremy Humpage in a chuckling manner, although he still continued to speak in a low whisper. "We must say another word or two upon that. But first of all take your money. Here's six tens—that's sixty: here's a twenty that's eighty: and here's ten good gold sovereigns as ever were coined. Look at it all!—ninety pounds!—isn't it a sum to part with? But now put it up safe in your pocket, and just take a towel and smear your face: it's rather blackened by bending over the furnace for so many hours."

Here the Hangman heard the sounds of a basin and jug rattling and water pouring out—so that he had no difficulty in understanding in his place of concealment, that the Swag Chovey Bloak had followed old Jeremy's advice and was performing his ablutions. Meanwhile Daniel Coffin thought to himself, "It's a precious piece of good luck that put me in the way of finding out where old Jeremy's iron safe is, and also gave me a hint about the lump of silver these rascals have been talking of. But I will be bound to say that instead of Mr. Jeremy Humpage sending it over to Mynheer Bekerlynck of the Hague to sell for him, it's Mr. Daniel Coffin that will call in person upon the said Mynheer Bekerlynck and get him to dispose of the said lump of silver then and there."

By the time the Hangman had made an end of his reflections the Swag Chovey Bloak had likewise finished his ablutions,—Jeremy Humpage having in the interval relocked the iron safe.

"Now what is it that you have got to say to me about that there scoundrel?" asked the Swag Chovey Bloak, in a cautious whisper. "Have you made up your mind about him?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" was the response, given

in a low but quaking, quivering tone, as if the old man had resolved upon the performance of something which he nevertheless trembled to think of. "Larry Sampson and his people are sure somehow or another to trace the fellow to my house; and what will become of me if I am caught harbouring a murderer? There will be a hue and cry presently—handbills printed—placards posted—and perhaps rewards offered: so that when once all this is done, I can't possibly pretend to remain ignorant of the fellow's crime any longer. Besides, why should he be here at all, if not to conceal himself from pursuit?—and therefore you see, my worthy friend, that if I do continue to harbour him I shall be taken up as an accessory after the fact. This will never, never do."

"To be sure not," responded the Swag Chovey Bloak; "and therefore, all things considered, you do well to give him up. So, as there is no time to be lost, I will just trudge along to Larry Sampson's and give him the proper information."

"But mind you tell him I sent you—mind you don't forget that," urged old Jeremy. "It's of the highest importance!"

"Don't be afraid—I shan't forget it," returned the other fence. "In less than a couple of hours you may rely upon seeing Larry down here with a lot of his people. But I say, by the bye," added the Swag Chovey Bloak, "there is no chance of his searching your premises—is there?"

"Who search the premises?" asked old Jeremy.

"Why, Larry Sampson to be sure," was the response. "Coming to arrest a murderer, don't you think he may take it into his head to have a look all over the house?"

"And if he did," interrupted old Jeremy Humpage, "you don't think for a moment that with all his keen scent and eagle eyes Larry Sampson could find the secret door in the passage overhead? No, no: it's a precious deal too well hidden! Doesn't it fit into the wainscot just as if it wasn't a door at all? and who would think for a moment, when visiting the two chambers on the right hand in that passage, that there was another room lying between them? No, no, my excellent friend, there is not the slightest chance of Larry poking his nose into the secret crib there and finding the lump of silver in the melting-pot! Besides," added old Jeremy in a more serious tone—for he had been chuckling with a sort of triumphant garrulity while previously speaking—"there will be no searching of the premises at all. To search one's premises is to treat one as an accomplice of the criminal who is arrested: but as it's me myself that sends up the information, through you, to Larry Sampson, he can't possibly treat me as an accomplice."

"Well, well—you know best," rejoined the Swag Chovey Bloak; "and if you are satisfied, I am sure I am. For my part, I shan't be at all sorry to see the Hangman hung up himself. I never liked him. Besides, he's done for now, and useless to us: he will never put no more things in our way—and therefore the sooner he's got rid of, the better."

"Yes, yes—that's exactly my opinion," said Humpage. "And now let's waste no more time in words; but you be off at once to Larry Sampson's."

"I shall go straight there," answered the Swag Chovey Bloak. "It's now half-past three o'clock by half-past five at latest Larry and his men will be down here. I suppose you will sit up for them?"

"Yes, yes," responded Humpage, in a shaking, quivering whisper. "I am in no humour to sleep—not a bit of it. So, when you are gone, I shall wait with anxiety till Sampson and the runners come."

"Now then I will be off:"—and with these words, the Swag Chovey Bloak moved upon tiptoe towards the door of the chamber, followed by old Humpage, who went to let him out of the house.

When they had issued from the room, Daniel Coffin lay still underneath the bed until the sounds of their retreating footsteps were no longer audible; and then he crept forth from his hiding-place. The expression of his countenance was even more diabolic than when he had been startled by catching the reflection of his features in the looking-glass:—with all the concentrated rage of a fiend, he was panting for revenge. His worst fears were confirmed—Humpage meant to betray him—and now he actually yearned to embrue his hands in the old man's blood.

"In two hours Larry Sampson and his men will be here—eh?" he muttered to himself: "but by that time I shall be far away. Two hours indeed!—ten minutes are now enough for the work that I have got to do! I am almost sorry I let that old scoundrel the Swag Chovey Bloak get off so easy: but it wouldn't have done to reveal myself from under the bed. At the first appearance of my precious countenance peeping forth, they would have raised an alarm before I could have knocked either of them on the head—the old housekeeper would have heard their cries—and the game would have been up with me. But as it is, I am right enough now!"

Such were the Hangman's musings as he concealed himself behind one of the bed-curtains. He felt pretty well assured that old Jeremy Humpage would return to his chamber, either to lie down and rest, or else to wash himself: for it was quite evident that he had been up all night in company with the Swag Chovey Bloak, and engaged in the pleasing occupation of melting down four-hundred pounds' worth of silver plate.

The Hangman's conjecture was correct relative to the return of old Jeremy Humpage to the chamber, so soon as he had shown his brother fence out of the house. Still and motionless as a statue behind the curtain, Daniel Coffin listened with breathless attention; and in the course of a few minutes he heard the old man's stealthy steps approaching along the passage.

"He walks as if he was treading on eggs," said the Hangman to himself. "That's because he's afraid of disturbing me: but I think it's a deuced deal more likely that I shall disturb him in a minute or two."

As the monster thus mused internally, he drew forth his terrible clasp-knife, and opened the blade, which, by means of a spring or catch, remained fixed, rendering the weapon as serviceably formidable as a stiletto.

Jeremy Humpage entered the chamber very noiselessly—shut the door—and locked it. He then approached the washing-stand, threw off his coat, and prepared to commence his ablutions. From behind the curtain Daniel Coffin watched his movements; and presently he beheld the old

man bend over the bason to bathe his face with a sponge. Now was the moment! Grasping his dagger-knife firmly in his right hand, the Hangman slipped from behind the curtain—one stride took him within reach of his victim—and then with a tremendous blow the stiletto was driven deep down between the old man's shoulders. A cry—but not a loud one—burst from the lips of Jeremy Humpage; and he rolled down upon the floor—a corpse!

The murderer, without the slightest remorse for the crime he had just committed, proceeded to rifle the pockets of his victim; and thence he took what money they contained, as well as a bunch of keys.

One of these fitted the safe, in which the Hangman found gold and bank-notes to the amount of about five hundred pounds, as nearly as he could guess at the quick glance he threw over the treasure. But he had no time to waste—for he did not fail to recollect that the Swag Chovey Bloak was on his way to Larry Sampson's.

Having secured the gold and notes about his person, the Hangman was on the point of retreating from the room, when he suddenly recollected that his clasp-knife might prove serviceable in case of any danger he should have to encounter elsewhere. He accordingly drew it forth from the body of his victim—wiped it upon a towel—closed the blade—and put it into his pocket. He then unlocked the door, and was issuing forth from the chamber, when in the passage he found himself face to face with the old housekeeper, who, knowing that her master had purposed to sit up all night, had risen and dressed herself to get him some breakfast.

The woman—although she knew Daniel Coffin well, and was aware that he transacted business with Humpage—was nevertheless amazed and terrified to behold him there at such an hour, especially as he was stealing forth from old Jeremy's chamber: for she was not aware that he had arrived at the house at all, and that he had been admitted by her master himself while she slept. Besides, his looks were now so full of a diabolic expression that his aspect alone at this moment, apart from all other circumstances, would have been enough to terrify her. A scream thrilled from her lips: but even while it was yet vibrating upon the air, the Hangman sprang at her with the force and fury of a wild beast—clutched her by the throat—stifled all farther power of utterance—and flinging her upon the floor of the passage, placed his knee upon her chest. In this manner he held her tight until she grew black in the face—her features became convulsed and livid—and she was suffocated.

Even after her body had ceased to writhe and convulse, and when there was every evidence that the vital spark had fled, the ferocious Hangman still kept his hands upon her neck—the fingers literally digging deep down into her flesh—so as to assure himself that she was indeed no more. Then he rose up, and without loss of time ascended the stairs to the passage above. That the secret room, where the lump of silver was contained, lay between the two chambers on the right hand side of that passage, he had gleaned from the conversation of Jeremy Humpage and the Swag Chovey Bloak. It was therefore by no means difficult to ascertain exactly where the laboratory was situated: but the puzzling part of the business was to discover how to open the door. The Hangman rapped with his knuckles upon all parts of the wainscot where he conceived that this door ought to be: but he could not tell by the sound where it was. Five minutes were thus lost—and he grew impatient. Still he made another trial,—curbing his feelings as well as he was able, and continuing his investigation with all possible carefulness: but another five minutes passed without any better success. Now he grew fearfully impatient—terribly exasperated. Time was so precious to him!

Already had near half-an-hour elapsed since the departure of the Swag Chovey Bloak—and there was not a minute to waste unnecessarily. What should he do? He would procure a hatchet and break down the whole of the wainscotting in that part of the passage, so as to find the door. But what if there were no hatchet to be found?—and nothing else would serve his purpose: for the wood-work was evidently very thick and solid, the better to conceal the existence of the secret door. He must curb his impatience once more, and give another trial. That there *was* some secret spring, he felt convinced: and this must be felt for. Still more carefully than hitherto did he renew his investigation: and, Ah! this time he is successful! He has touched somethiog—he scarcely knows what—he does not pause to look: it is sufficient for him that the door suddenly flies open; and with an exclamation of delight he rushes into the laboratory.

But as he thus springs across the threshold, the door shuts of its own accord behind him.

CHAPTER CCII.

THE CORPSE.—THE SECRET CHAMBER.

We must now go back for a few hours, in order to give some necessary explanations. The Buttoner, as the reader may already have understood, was indeed profoundly stricken with remorse for the share he had taken in the murder of Nell Gibson. Since the perpetration of that crime many months back, he had become altogether an altered being,—abandoning his old companions—wandering about the country, desolate and miserable, like a lost and starved dog—and not having even the spirit to follow his wonted avocations of thimble-rigging in order to procure his bread. The image of Nell Gibson never ceased to haunt him: it followed him about by day—it stood by him at night, wherever he lay down to rest. At length, so terrible became his thoughts—so deep his compunction—that he grew reckless of life; and in process of time the whispering of conscience suggested that the only means of procuring peace for his soul, was to make an atonement by a full confession to the proper authorities.

In this mood had he returned to London, at the time of which we have been speaking in preceding chapters;—and instinctively bending his way towards Mrs. Young's abode—the place where he had last dwelt in company with Nell Gibson—he chanced to meet old Mother Franklin in the immediate vicinage. To her he at once revealed the

fate of the young woman—the remorse that he had experienced—and the determination to which he had come. It was while thus discoursing that they had been noticed and partially overheard by Bencull, as the reader has already seen. Fearing, therefore, that some suspicion of his intent might have been excited in the mind of that man, the Buttoner resolved to lose no time in executing his project of atonement. He had accordingly proceeded at once with old Mother Franklin to Mrs. Young's abode:—and to this woman did he repeat all that he had just been saying to Mother Franklin. Mrs. Young—fearful of being considered an accessory to the crime if she were to conceal her knowledge of it, now that in all its particulars it was fully made known to her,—urged the Buttoner to accompany her without delay to Larry Sampson's house in Long Acre; and thither did they accordingly proceed together. On arriving at the officer's dwelling, they learnt that he was not at home, but would return shortly. Mrs. Young thereupon asked Dame Margery, Mr. Sampson's housekeeper, to furnish them with writing-materials; and this being done, Mrs. Young penned a hasty but explicit narrative, containing the requisite particulars, and also a statement to the effect that the Buttoner would remain at her house ready to surrender himself up whenever Sampson might choose to come and fetch him. To this document she made the Buttoner append his name: and having sealed it, she left it with Dame Margery to be given to Mr. Sampson the instant he should return home.

This being done, the Buttoner felt somewhat more easy in his mind; and as he accompanied Mrs. Young back to her abode at Bermondsey, he did not once appear to regret the step he had taken. On reaching the house, Mother Franklin, as already described, hurried out into the passage to give them the whispered intimation that Daniel

Coffin was in the parlour, and that he evidently suspected what was going on. Therefore was it that when the Hangman endeavoured to escape abruptly from the place, the Buttoner opposed his departure; —and then followed the conflict in the passage which we have already described. The Public Executioner managed to get clear off: but before he thus fled, he committed sad havoc amongst his assailants. Old Mother Franklin was so severely trampled under his feet that she was subsequently carried in a dying state up to the attic which she occupied; and the Buttoner had received so severe a blow on the head from the iron heel of Daniel Coffin's great thick boot, that he also was left in a very dangerous predicament. Mrs. Young had an arm broken by the poker which she herself had first taken as a weapon of attack, but which the Hangman had wrenched from her hands: two of the frail young women dwelling in her house, likewise had bones broken; and a third daughter of crime was most severely injured—all by the random blows which Daniel Coffin had struck with the formidable weapon.

Soon afterwards Lawrence Sampson and several of his men arrived at the house, and received from the Buttoner's lips a full confirmation of the tale which had been recorded in the document drawn up by Mrs. Young. He had but just strength enough to repeat the particulars; and the surgeon who had been summoned to attend on the wounded at Mrs. Young's house, declared that the Buttoner could not be removed for a day or two. A Bow Street runner was accordingly left to keep watch upon him, while Larry Sampson and the rest of his men proceeded to Jacob's Island to arrest Bencull. As the reader has already been informed, the Mushroom Faker and the Durrynacker were captured at the same time with Bencull himself: but the Hangman had evaded the search of the officers of justice.

Soon after it was daylight in the morning—that same Sabbath morning, be it recollected, which was marked by the horrible crimes of Daniel Coffin at the abode of Jeremy Humpage in Whitechapel—several persons made their appearance with drags at the Folly Bridges to fish for the corpse of the murdered Nell Gibson. This proceeding naturally excited an immense sensation at Jacob's Island; and in a very few minutes after the rumour had circulated for what purpose the men were come, the windows of all the dingy, dilapidated houses overlooking the black ditch on both sides, were crowded—even at that early hour—with anxious faces. A glance, thrown around upon those countenances so marked with the traces of squalor, wretchedness, and demoralization, would have afforded a perfect index to the condition of that neighbourhood, as if to the reading of the hidden pages of a volume filled with obscenities, vices, and horrors. The men, however, who had come to drag the dyke, took no such philosophic view of the scene, but addressed themselves in right good earnest to the loathsome task which they were there to fulfil.

On each of the bridges did two of these men begin to drag; and, at first, innumerable were the rotting remains of cats and dogs that the drags brought up from the thick slimy ditch. All kinds of filth, offal, and garbage were thus disturbed, and either brought up to the surface or dragged to land; and the effluvium which the troubled dyke now exhaled was nauseating to a degree. Yet that was the water—or rather the liquid slime—which the inhabitants of Jacob's Island had to drink, and to use for all purposes of cookery or ablution—thus imbibing the seeds of disease and death from that fetid stagnant ditch which served alike as their cistern and their sewer! Such was it at the period of which we are writing—and such is it at the present day. And then, forsooth! we are coolly told—and what is more, expected to believe—that the poor are cared for by the rich, and that the wretched inmates of squalid hovels, breathing the atmosphere of pestilence and death, are an object of sympathy with the wealthy and the proud ones who roll in their carriages, sleep upon down, dress in fine garments, and eat off plate of silver and of gold!

But to continue our narrative. After having dragged the ditch for some time without any success, the men whom Larry Sampson had sent thither for the purpose began to think that the corpse for which they were seeking must have been carried into the Thames on some occasion when the sluice-gate was opened. But the experience of one who was better acquainted than the rest with Jacob's Island, suggested that it was far more likely the corpse was deeply embedded in the mud. The men therefore attached weights to their drags, in order to make the hooks sink deep down into the slimy bed of the dyke; and the result of this new experiment speedily proved successful. To be brief, the half-decomposed corpse of a female was presently dragged up from the muddy depths, and deposited upon the bridge where the men who experienced this success were stationed. We will not shock the reader by pausing to describe the loathsome appearance which the once handsome and well-formed young woman now presented to the eye: let it be sufficient to state that the spectacle was so revolting as to fill with horror the minds of even the callous and hardened denizens of Jacob's Island.

The corpse was conveyed into Bencull's now deserted crib—there to await the Coroner's Inquest which would be holden upon it in due course; and one of the men who had fished up the body, was left in charge of it. That is to say, he locked up all the doors of the house and remained watching outside, for the object was too loathsome in every respect for the individual to stay inside the place along with it.

Mr. Lawrence Sampson rose very early on this same morning: for he was resolved to adopt all possible measures for the arrest of Daniel Coffin. Scarcely had the officer dressed himself and taken a mouthful of breakfast, when he received intelligence that the corpse of the murdered woman had been found; and very soon afterwards the Swag Chovey Bloak called to inform him that the Hangman was at Jeremy Humpage's house. Of course the fence made Sampson understand that old Humpage had not voluntarily secreted the criminal, but that he had forced himself into that asylum. The Bow Street officer accordingly lost no time in repairing with half-a-dozen of his men to the very midst of that morass of wretchedness and demoralization bearing the name of Whitechapel; —and on reaching the street where Humpage's establishment was situated, Larry Sampson disposed of his subordinates in such a manner that

they might anticipate any attempt at escape on the part of the Hangman, should he take the alarm before his capture could be accomplished. Two men were left to watch in the street; two were sent round to obtain admission into one of the houses the back windows of which overlooked the yard in the rear of Humpage's establishment;—and when these dispositions were made, Larry Sampson, attended by his two remaining followers, knocked at the front door of the habitation.

Several minutes elapsed, and the summons received no answer. Sampson now suspected that something was wrong; and without waiting to repeat that summons, he at once ordered an entry to be effected by breaking open the shutters of one of the windows on the ground floor. This was speedily done; and the officer, with a loaded pistol in his hand, was the first to enter the house, his two comrades following close behind. They were now in one of the spacious ware-rooms of the establishment; and having assured themselves that no one was concealed in that part of the premises, they forced open the door, which was always carefully locked at night, and thus effected an entry into the passage on the ground floor. All the lower part of the house being searched in vain, they ascended to the first storey; and there, in the middle of the passage, they discovered the corpse of the housekeeper. The old woman was quite dead; and the fearful marks upon her neck, as well as the hideous distortion of her countenance, showed at once by what means her murder had been accomplished. The discovery of old Jeremy's body in the bed-chamber followed next; and the open door of the safe proved that robbery had accompanied murder.

That all these crimes were the horrible work of the Hangman, there could not be the slightest doubt; and that he had saved himself by flight was naturally conceived. Nevertheless, Larry Sampson instituted the strictest search throughout the establishment: every apartment was entered, save and excepting that secret room which served as the laboratory for the murdered fence.

Without entertaining the slightest suspicion that there was such a place within those walls, Larry Sampson and his two men issued forth again from the house; but in so doing, they perceived that the street door was bolted and chained inside. It was therefore clear enough that the Hangman had not quitted the premises by this means of egress; and inasmuch as throughout the search just concluded no open window nor other indication of flight had met the officer's notice, Larry resolved to go over the entire establishment once more. This he did without discovering the slightest clue which to his experienced eye could afford an indication of the course taken by the murderer when he quitted the house. Was it possible that the Hangman had still remained concealed somewhere upon the premises? Sampson scarcely thought it likely; and yet he did not feel justified in abandoning the search as yet.

Leaving the two men who were with him to keep watch inside the house, Larry Sampson proceeded round to that dwelling where two others of his men had obtained admission in order to watch from the back windows;—and from that point where they were already posted, did Larry Sampson now survey all the back part of Humpage's establishment. His keen eye very soon observed that there was one window on the second storey which was boarded up, and painted in such a manner as to have the appearance of being uniform with the dingy brickwork itself, so as to conceal the existence of a window there altogether. Sampson's attention was first drawn to this contrivance by the appearance of two small dark spots which struck him to be intended as air-holes; and on a more scrutinizing survey he was enabled to trace the outlines of the shutters that blocked up the window. He then studied the exact position of this concealed window in reference to the adjacent ones on the same floor; and with all these facts well arranged in his clear and comprehensive mind, he hastened back again to the scene of the double murder.

On rejoining his two followers whom he had left in charge of the establishment, he told them what he had seen, intimating his suspicion that there was some hidden nook, closet, or chamber in the house which had hitherto escaped their investigation. To the second floor did they accordingly re-ascend, and proceeded to examine the two chambers between which the laboratory was situated. Now that they were on the right scent, and that their suspicions were directed in the proper channel, it was not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that between the two chambers there was quite sufficient room for a smaller one. Their next step was to examine the woodwork in the passage: but there they discovered no indication of a door. Of course Larry Sampson was not to be baffled: he felt assured that though he perceived not the slightest sign of a door, he was nevertheless standing upon the threshold of an important discovery. He therefore despatched one of his men to fetch the nearest carpenter in the neighbourhood—or at all events to borrow a hatchet and the other necessary implements for breaking down the wainscot of the passage.

In about a quarter of an hour the runner returned, accompanied by a carpenter with his basket of tools at his back. The work of demolition then commenced; and in a very few minutes it became apparent enough that there was really a door, most curiously contrived and admirably concealed, in that place. But even before it was completely broken down, and also before the wood-work was perforated in such a way as to afford a glimpse of the interior of the laboratory, the carpenter's hatchet suddenly struck upon the hidden spring—and the door opened of its own accord.

Then did a terrible malediction, accompanied by a ferocious howl like that of a wild beast, burst forth from the interior of the hidden chamber—hidden now no longer: and Larry Sampson coolly observed, "It is he."

The next instant the Hangman, holding a loaded pistol in each hand, and his crowbar between his teeth, sprang forth, as if the same wild beast that had given the savage growl was now desperately turning upon its enemies. One of his weapons, aimed point blank at Larry Sampson, fortunately flashed in the pan: the other, levelled at the carpenter, missed him by a hair's breadth and lodged its bullet in the wainscot facing the door of the laboratory. Then, ere he had time to make any farther attempt at resistance, or to achieve any

real mischief, the ruffian, strong in his maddened fury though he were, was seized upon by the two runners and the carpenter—this last-mentioned individual threatening to strike him down with his hatchet if he did not surrender. At the same time Larry Sampson, utterly undismayed by the narrow escape his own life had just experienced, pointed a pistol towards the Hangman's head,—saying with his wonted phlegmatic coolness, "If you resist any farther, you are a dead man!"

It would be impossible to describe the horrible expression of rage and hate which now fastened as it were upon Daniel Coffin's countenance: nor shall we sully our pages by recording the diabolic imprecation which rolled forth in a deep growl from his lips. Perceiving that resistance was indeed futile, he submitted to have the fetters and manacles, wherewith the Bow Street runners were ever provided, fastened upon his limbs; and then, so soon as he felt himself utterly powerless, he sank into a mood of dogged and ferocious sullenness. A hackney-coach was speedily fetched; and the formidable Daniel Coffin was conveyed to a place of security.

One word of explanation relative to a particular incident, ere we conclude this chapter. The reader will remember that when the Hangman had discovered the secret spring, and had rushed with a joy so wildly exultant into the laboratory, the door had closed of its own accord behind him. This circumstance did not at the first moment trouble him at all—nor even attract his notice: his eye had caught sight of the huge lump of silver in the melting-pot, and all his thoughts were concentrated in the task of enveloping the treasure in his handkerchief and securing it about his person. But this done, he suddenly became aware of the horrifying fact that he was a prisoner. Vainly did he search for the secret spring: he could not find it! Then he attempted to break the door open with his crowbar: but its strength resisted all his endeavours. In short, wearied with ineffectual exertions, and thrown into a terrific fever-heat by his maddened endeavours to break loose, he had sat down to recruit his strength—when it struck him that the best course to adopt was to remain quiet and trust to the place of his concealment remaining undiscovered when the house should be searched. This he did—and the reader has already seen the result.

CHAPTER CIII.

THE DESERTED MISTRESS.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning; and Penelope Arbuthnot was seated in her own chamber at Windsor Castle, gazing through the open casement upon the beautiful view which the window commanded. The Maid of Honour—a maid only in name, and not in reality—was loosely apparelled in an elegant morning wrapper. She had not long risen from her couch: her hair was but negligently gathered up;—no advance had been made in her toilet beyond the wonted ablutions; and the wrapper had been so carelessly flung on that it displayed more than it concealed of the lady's voluptuous charms. But then, she was alone: and moreover, her thoughts were too deeply occupied to allow her to observe the semi-nudity of her person.

The casement was, as we have said, open: but on the broad ledge an array of flowers formed a beautiful screen to veil Penelope from the look of any one who might have been walking in the grounds upon which the window looked. The breeze—soft, and genial, and warm with the sun of August—fanned her somewhat flushed cheeks, and played with a refreshing influence upon her heated brow; while the flowers, alike in the window and on the parterres of the garden below, loaded the air with a delicious fragrance which was wafted all around her.

We have said upon a former occasion that Penelope was not exactly beautiful—nor could she be called positively handsome: but she was a fine full-grown young woman, with a figure nobly developed, and endowed with the most voluptuous charms—blending the noble height of Diana with the exuberant contours of a Hebe. Then her large bright eyes and a pair of luscious red lips gave animation to her countenance: her smile in her gay moments was sweet, but with an expression of soft sensuousness; and sweeter still when expanding so as to reveal the teeth of ivory whiteness. Although her person was upon a large scale and her limbs were robust and massive, yet were they symmetrically sculptured, with due fineness in the hands, the taper fingers, the rounded ankles, and the long narrow feet. Thus, altogether, Penelope Arbuthnot was well calculated to be admired, even amidst a throng of Court beauties; and she was of that voluptuous figure and also of that age—being twenty-six—which were especially pleasing to the Prince Regent.

That she had become the mistress of his Royal Highness some five months previously to the date of which we are at present writing, the reader is well aware. How is it, then, that she looks mournful and unhappy now?—does she regret the surrender of her person to the Prince?—did she feel no gratification in thus acquiring that favour which so many higher-born damsels panted for in vain?—or has she already experienced some treatment on the part of her royal paramour to produce this depression of spirits?

In the midst of her reverie the door of the chamber opened, and her mother entered the room. It was a look of almost hatred which Penelope flung towards her parent, as the opening and closing of the door suddenly startled the young lady from her profound meditation.

"My dear child," began Mrs. Arbuthnot, as she advanced in a coaxing manner towards her daughter, "how is it that I find you in this moping mood?"

"Mother," cried Penelope, rising to her feet and looking sternly upon her parent, "how is it possible you can ask me this question, when you yourself ought to be able to solve the enigma—if such it be to you?"

"I suppose, my dear," said the Bedchamber Woman—for such was Mrs. Arbuthnot in the Queen's household—"I suppose that you have acquired the certainty as to your condition?"

"Yes," interrupted her daughter bitterly. "I am indeed in a way to become a mother. And now will you tell me what name my child is to bear when it comes into the world?"

"You speak, Penelope, as if you were the only

young lady who had ever intrigued with a Prince. If you had married a plain Mr. Smith or a humble Mr. Jones, your child would be called Thomas or Jane Smith, or Henry or Mary Jones, just as the circumstances of the sex might be: but as it is, the father of your child can make it a Lord or a Lady; and it is but to look over a list of the most high-sounding names and choose the one that pleases you best."

"Mother," answered Penelope, fixing a strange look upon her parent, while the colour suddenly fled from her cheeks, leaving them as pale as marble, —"do you remember that when you first proposed to me that I should abandon myself to the Prince, I bade you beware lest all this should teach me to despise and contemn—perhaps even hate—my own mother? Ah! I fear that that hour is now come: and assuredly, whatever feeling of bitterness I might have entertained towards you when you first entered the room ere now, it has been enhanced by the flippancy of your last observations."

"Flippancy, my dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "I was merely telling you the truth."

"Ah! but even allowing your words to be taken seriously," cried Penelope, "let us suppose that I had married a plain gentleman or an honest shopkeeper—would not my child have had an honourable name, and from its very birth the fond care of a father?"

"All this would be well enough," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a look very much resembling disgust, "if you were a young sentimental girl of seventeen or eighteen, who had been seduced under very cruel circumstances by some treacherous admirer and under a promise of marriage. But really, as matters now stand, there is something too absurd in a young woman of your age—past six-and-twenty—and with the Prince Regent as your lover——"

"Lover!" echoed Penelope, her looks again expressing a strange bitterness: "do you call an ungrateful sensualist—an unfeeling profligate like that—a lover?"

"Penelope, there is something in your mind with which I am unacquainted," said her mother, now surveying her with a more fixed and earnest attention than at first. "What has occurred?—anything new? anything unpleasant?"

"Listen, mother—and I will tell you," replied Penelope, as she pointed to a chair, while she resumed her own at the window. "You know that the Prince Regent paid a hurried visit to the Castle last evening, to consult her Majesty upon something of importance——"

"Yes, I am aware of it; and I presume that you are offended because his Royal Highness was too hurried and too anxious to get back to London to pass the night here, so that he might have been in your arms—or even to be able to snatch a short half hour's conversation with you ere he went."

"You are wrong, mother—you are wrong," exclaimed Penelope. "The Prince did snatch half-an-hour to speak to me alone last evening; and it is precisely in consequence of what then took place between us, that you see me as I am this morning. But again I beg you to listen—that is to say, if you indeed desire explanations from my lips?"

"I do: you must know I do," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, now displaying an evident anxiety: for she began to fear that something was wrong between her daughter and the Prince. "Proceed, my dear child."

"I need scarcely remind you," continued Penelope, "that when first you proposed that I should become the mistress of the Prince, I listened to you in amazement and in horror. But you told me a tale of pecuniary embarrassments—which I have since discovered to be false—and you used so much persuasion, that, in short, I knew not what to do, unless it were to yield. And I did yield. Then, the barrier of virtue once broken down, I gave myself up to the enjoyments of sensual passion, and likewise to ambitious dreamings. The Prince, every time he came to the Castle, treated me with kindness—even with a show of affection: he gave me a few presents, as you are aware—and he made many brilliant promises. Three or four weeks ago I hinted to him my apprehension that the effects of our amour would in time become visible: but he did not seem to care much about the intelligence I thus imparted to his ear. Indeed, he received it with a kind of indifference which struck me to be heartless and even cruel. But I dared not admit to myself that such was the case; I endeavoured to reason my mind out of that belief;—and therefore was it that I kept my fears from you. But last evening I took the opportunity of whispering to the Prince that I besought a few minutes interview with him; and he contrived that it should take place previous to his departure. Then I assured him that what I had hinted at as a possibility a month back, had now become a certainty. O mother! I expected——No, I cannot say that I *expected*: for my mind had been previously haunted with sore misgivings on the subject: but I had *hoped* that his manner might change, and that when he learnt that he was beyond all doubt to become the father of my child in due course, he would treat me with tenderness and affection. But, Ah! if you had beheld the careless indifference—nay, even the coldness, with which he received my words——"

Here Penelope stopped suddenly short, and burst into tears.

"My dear child," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, now becoming frightened, "this is indeed serious. I had not anticipated such a thing!"

"No, mother," exclaimed Penelope bitterly as she wiped away her tears, "I am well aware of all that has been passing in your mind! You have buoyed yourself up with the hope that the Prince would provide brilliantly alike for me and the coming babe; and that in the splendour of the position to which he would raise me, my disgrace should be altogether absorbed. Judging by all he had done for Lady Sackville, you flattered yourself that he would make a peeress of me—bestow upon me a handsome pension—and by loading me with favours, make me the object of envy and adoration in the Court circle, so that some proud nobleman would be glad to lay his coronet at my feet and sue for my hand. Yes—these have been your hopes—these have been your dreams. To this end have all your intrigues and machinations been directed."

"Penelope, you are right—you are right!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But do not tell me that my hopes are to be disappointed——"

"They are, they are," rejoined her daughter, now greatly excited. "I tell you that I have no hold

upon the Prince's affections. I never had: it was as a toy and a plaything for the moment that I have served! He is sated with me—and he scarcely had the delicacy to conceal it."

"Oh! the ungrateful monster," cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, now trembling with rage: then the next moment she began to shed tears of vexation. "But perhaps he was in an angry mood, Penelope?" she suddenly exclaimed: "perhaps he had something to vex him? It is well known that he feels deeply the loss of Venetia——"

"Yes—it is because he loves Venetia as much as a debauched sensualist like him *can* possibly love a woman otherwise than as the object of gross indulgence—it is because he loves her, I say," continued Penelope, with the emphasis of bitter vexation,—"because he pines after her—because he yearns for her—that all his thoughts, all his sympathies, and all his longings are centred in her, and that he has no room in his heart for even the slightest feeling of pity on behalf of me!"

"But tell me what he said? how did he behave to you last evening?" inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot anxiously.

"Oh! it is useless to enter upon these details," exclaimed Penelope. "Suffice it to say that when I told him my position and besought his advice, he answered with a cold indifference that he had no doubt *you* would be able to manage the matter easily enough when the time came—that I must go into retirement for a while, with leave of absence from Court—and that if I wanted a few hundred pounds he dared say he should be able to spare them. Now, mother," asked Penelope, with a biting irony, "what becomes of your fine fabric of hope and ambition after all this?"

"Penelope, I am distressed beyond measure," answered her mother. "The Prince's conduct is cruel and heartless to a degree. I had never a very high opinion of his character for generosity and honour: but I certainly did not expect that he would show such brutal callousness as this."

"Mother," rejoined Penelope, "you have sold me to a villain! Would it not have been better that I should have become the honoured wife even of a humble Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones?"—and there was again a terrible irony in the young lady's words and a malicious fire in her eyes.

"Daughter, do not make things worse by showing a bad temper. Perhaps everything is not as bad as you fancy it. There is plenty of time before you. Months will elapse ere your condition will become visible; and in the meantime who knows how the Prince's humour may change? He will altogether have forgotten his Venetia."

"Yes—and will have taken up with some other mistress, equally brilliant—or if not so brilliant as Venetia, at all events sufficiently splendid to keep *me* altogether in the back-ground."

"Do not give way to this despondency," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, determined to hope even until the very last: "we must think of what is to be done. I do not pretend for a moment that you are so beautiful as Lady Sackville: but you are nevertheless a very fine young woman, and it is impossible that the Prince can remember your charms with indifference. I am really afraid, Penelope, that you yourself have not played your cards well—that you have not exerted all your powers of fascination—that you have not done your best to please and captivate the Prince? Perhaps you have been cold——"

"No, mother," answered the young lady, a crimson glow now mantling upon her cheeks, then rapidly suffusing itself over her neck and upon the luxuriant orbs of her heaving bosom: "when once the barrier of chastity was broken down, I surrendered myself up, as I have already told you, to the intoxicating delights of passion, and was a very wanton in the Prince's arms. But even now, mother, you are labouring hard to deceive yourself: you are still striving to buoy yourself up with hope when there is none! I tell you that we shall obtain nothing from the Prince. In short, I am a cast-off mistress—and Oh! deep, deep is the humiliation!"

As she gave utterance to these last words, all the glow of shame, which had risen to her cheeks and suffused her neck when she confessed herself a wanton, fled away, leaving her pale as marble; and her looks sank into the profoundest melancholy.

"It is awkward—awkward indeed," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, not knowing exactly what course to adopt.

"Awkward, mother! Is *that* the term to be applied to this cruel embarrassment?" suddenly exclaimed Penelope, raising her eyes and looking with mingled indignation and reproach in her parent's face. "May it not prove utterly ruinous? Think you not that it is generally suspected that I have been the Prince's mistress?—and so long as it is believed I am in high favour with him, the old Queen herself will shut her eyes upon the amour, and the ladies of the Court will pet, caress, and envy me. But the moment it is known that the princely favour exists for me no longer, will not the Queen be the very first to look coldly upon me? and will not her ladies treat me with scorn, mockery, and contempt? Yes: but even *this* is not all: the worst is behind! For if accident should reveal my position before I can obtain leave to go into retirement, shall I not be expelled ignominiously from the Court? and would not you be involved in my ruin? Then what is to become of us? While we were poor, we always contrived to live somehow or another, because our characters were not gone: but if once thrown upon the world, with our reputations blasted—I as an unwedded mother, and you as the wretched disappointed pander to your daughter's shame—who will take us by the hand? who will befriend us? what shall we do?"

But Mrs. Arbuthnot was not listening to the latter part of her daughter's speech: she had fallen into a deep reverie, and was revolving in her mind a variety of plans that suggested themselves as a means of encountering the present emergency. When Penelope had ceased speaking, she also sank into a meditative mood; and there was a long pause before either mother or daughter again broke silence.

"My dear child," suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, "I have it—I have it! Depend upon it I shall be enabled to bring the Prince to reason, and make him do something for you!"

"Anything, mother, so long as it will ensure our positions at Court," cried Penelope, "and save me from disgrace. But what plan have you in your head?"

"Leave it to me, child—do not ask me any questions now. I must act, and not talk:"—then, as she rose from her seat, she added, "Be of good cheer. I feel convinced that the Prince Regent will not only be brought to terms, but even perhaps be compelled to do more for us than we have ever anticipated. I am now going to London."

Penelope's curiosity was greatly excited and her hopes were also revived by the tone of confidence in which her mother spoke: but Mrs. Arbuthnot would say no more at present; and again bidding her daughter be of good cheer, she quitted the apartment.

CHAPTER CCIV.

THE CAPTAIN'S VISIT.

It was between three and four in the afternoon of the same day, and the Prince Regent was seated alone at luncheon in one of the splendid apartments at Carlton House. His Royal Highness had been giving audience to Ministers and Ambassadors during the early part of the day; and much fatigued with the ceremonies, he was now refreshing himself with some luxurious viands and racy wines; but from time to time he made a movement of impatience, muttering half aloud, "I wish to heaven that Venetia were here!"

Having pushed away his plate, he threw himself back upon the sofa where he was seated; and as he continued to sip his wine, gave way to his reflections.

"Venetia has certainly abandoned me altogether: she will not come back—her husband has left me and has gone to join her! She is therefore lost to me for ever! Ah, who shall supply her place? Ernestina, who in voluptuous beauty of person came nearest to Venetia, is no more; and amidst the whole bevy of fair ones in whose arms I have already revelled, or who are ready to bestow their favours upon me if I say but the word, there is not one that can compare with Venetia—no, not one!"

The Prince Regent was in a melancholy mood; and he felt that the wine did not inspire him with spirits. He wished for a companion at that moment, to enliven him with hilarious conversation; and he was thinking for whom he should send, when the door opened and a domestic came to announce that Captain Tash solicited an audience.

"Ah! Tash is come back then!" muttered the Prince to himself. "I am glad of it: he is the very fellow to cheer me up in my present low spirits:"—and he accordingly bade the footman introduce the Captain immediately.

This command was promptly obeyed; and the gallant officer, who was apparelled in the same remarkable fashion as when we beheld him visiting in his cabriolet at Leveson House, made his appearance. The domestic withdrew; and the Prince, giving the Captain a cordial welcome, bade him sit down and help himself to wine.

"I hope that I see your Royal Highness in a blooming condition," said the Captain, as he deliberately filled a tumbler with Port wine to the brim: then having drained the glass as quietly and calmly as if its contents had been water, he observed, "Pardon me, Prince, if I am too familiar—but you look a trifle out of sorts?"

"And I feel so too, Tash," responded his Royal Highness. "But before we talk upon any other subject, give me an account of your proceedings."

"I have fulfilled your Royal Highness's instructions to the very letter," said the Captain; "and I will now give you the details with the most perfect accuracy. On receiving your Royal Highness's orders last week, I proceeded at once to the surgeon's house in Bridge Street, and requested an immediate interview with the young man bearing the singular name of *Jack the Foundling*. At first the surgeon told me that no such person was there: but when I whispered in his ear to the effect that I came from your Royal Highness, his manner changed in a moment, he looked significant enough, and conducted me up-stairs to a nice comfortable room, where I was introduced to the young man. The surgeon left us together; and I began speaking to him in the kindest and friendliest way. Indeed, that is my nature—as I am an uncommon good-tempered fellow. I soon saw that the lad took a fancy to me; and we speedily got upon very good terms with each other. I asked him if he had altogether recovered from the effects of his wound; and he said that he had pretty well, though he did not feel so strong as before he had received it, notwithstanding so many months had elapsed. I then represented to him that there was some kind friend in the back-ground who had interested himself on his behalf, and had been paying the surgeon all this time to take care of him and treat him with every possible attention. The lad said that he knew very well the surgeon had not been keeping him there for the last seven or eight months out of mere philanthropy—particularly as a certain sort of mystery had been observed in making him stay in-doors as much as possible, and only taking him out for an airing occasionally of an evening in a carriage. I answered that all this had been done with the view of preventing him from falling again into the hands of the infamous people with whom he had been brought up and who might have been on the look-out for him. Thereupon Jack the Foundling observed that during the time he lay stretched upon a sick bed in consequence of his wound, he had reflected upon his past career and had hoped that something would be done to prevent him from relapsing into his old habits."

"Then he did really seem as if he wished to turn over a new leaf?" asked the Prince.

"No doubt of it, your Royal Highness," responded Tash, taking the opportunity of the interruption to refill and empty his tumbler. "The lad told me that some time ago Mr. Lawrence Sampson, the Bow Street officer, had tried to reclaim him; but that some evil spirit getting possession of his soul, prompted him to return to his old friends. He assured me however that his long illness had given his mind a better turn, and he really felt anxious to do something honest for his livelihood. I then told him that his former protector Daniel Coffin had that very morning been arrested for murder, and would be hanged as sure as he himself had tucked up scores in his time. The young fellow had not previously heard of the occurrence; and he certainly did not seem much affected by it—but observed, that he always thought Coffin would come to some bad end

He nevertheless did manifest some uneasiness about a young woman and her brother named Melmoth, and who, he said, lived with Daniel Coffin. He told me that he and these Melmoths had been brought up together, and that he had a sort of affection for them. I assured him that from what I had learnt they did not appear to be at all involved in Coffin's troubles: and I even went so far as to declare that I would see something was done for them in case Coffin should go out of the world leaving them destitute. This assurance evidently gave young Jack very great satisfaction; and looking hard at me, he said, '*I suppose, sir, you are the kind friend who has been in the back-ground all the while and who has interested himself in me?*'—'*Well, well, my boy, perhaps I am,*' said I, '*perhaps I am: but I don't say so, mind; and you must not ask me any more questions.*'—That was the way I managed him, your Royal Highness," added Tash; "for a man who can parry a thrust with a rapier is not likely to be at a loss to do the same with a searching question."

"You acted most prudently, my dear fellow," said the Prince, laughing. "Come, fill your tumbler again, and then proceed."

"This wine is excellent," observed Tash, when he had poured another quantum down his throat: he then went on to say, "You see, sir, I played my part so well that the lad soon had confidence in me; and may-be he thought that I was either his father, or some very near relation, having particular reasons not to acknowledge him openly. However, be that as it may, he certainly received the impression that I was the kind friend who had been in the back-ground during his residence at the surgeon's, and that I had at length come forward to take some decisive step respecting his future prospects."

"And of course you suffered that impression to remain upon his mind?" said his Royal Highness interrogatively.

"To be sure I did," responded Tash. "Was it not in obedience to the hints you had previously given me for my guidance in the matter? However, to make a long story as short as possible," continued the Captain, "I went on to explain the plan which was proposed for the future benefit of the youth. I told him that if he liked to go out to Jamaica, a comfortable situation in a mercantile house, with a good salary, was at his service in that island—that there was a ship then in the Downs to sail with the next fair wind—and that if he would go down with me to Deal and embark in that vessel, I would place a hundred guineas in his hands ere taking leave of him on board. I showed him the letter from the London branch of the Jamaica house, guaranteeing the situation; and I also showed him the money. He did not take many minutes to consider, but gave his consent with joy and gratitude. The business being thus settled, I sent and ordered a post-chaise; and away we sped into Kent. We reached Deal that evening, and went at once to a slop-dealer's, or outfitter's, where I bought him a sea-chest and everything suited for the voyage. Next morning we went on board the ship: but as the wind did not change favourably till yesterday, the vessel had to remain at anchor in the Downs for some days. I staid with him on board: for having once succeeded in getting him there, I did not choose to trust him out of my sight, or give him the chance of slipping away in some boat, in case he altered his mind. But he did not appear to repent of his decision: on the contrary, his spirits rose in proportion as he became accustomed to shipboard. As for me, I managed to pass the time pretty pleasantly: for the Captain of the vessel was a jovial good chap, and there were six or eight merry blades of passengers on board. So I amused myself by making them all drunk every night, and when I parted from them yesterday afternoon, they swore I was the best fellow in existence. As for Master Jack, I gave him his hundred guineas at parting, and he wept with gratitude. I saw the ship sail; and this morning I took a post-chaise and returned straight to London, to report all these particulars to your Royal Highness. So here I am—and that's my history."

"You have acquitted yourself most admirably, my dear Captain," said the Prince. "I knew full well that you would not fail to execute my commission with delicacy, prudence, and caution—keeping me altogether out of sight and out of the question, while conversing with the lad. But tell me—he had not the slightest suspicion that I had ever interested myself concerning him?"

"Not the slightest," responded Tash. "The surgeon had evidently been most discreet and reserved during the many months the young fellow was under his roof. Besides, have I not already told you, sir, that so far from even dreaming of your intervention in his behalf, Master Jack was perfectly convinced that he saw his previously unknown friend in me?"

"True, to be sure!" ejaculated the Prince. "But now let us talk of other things. While you were gone I lost my young friend, your boon companion——"

"What, Sackville?" exclaimed the Captain. "Ah! I knew full well, before I went, that he would leave your Royal Highness. Those letters he received from his wife made him quite spoony; and when Sir Valentine Malvern paid his debts, it regularly clinched the nail of his sentimentalism. And so he is gone? Well, he behaved very handsomely to me. When I went and told him last Sunday that I should most likely have to leave town for a few days, he took me by the hand, saying, '*Tash, my dear fellow, you have been my companion for some months past, in many a frolic; and though I am going to turn over a new leaf, I do not mean at the same time to show you the cold shoulder. All my debts are paid, and all the bills on which your name appeared together with mine, are got in and burnt. So you have nothing to fear on that score; and there are five hundred guineas for you as a token of friendship.*'—In this manner was it that we parted; and therefore I have nothing to say against Sackville. Depend upon it, sir, he will settle down into a quiet, steady, domesticated husband, always keeping regular hours—taking his supper every night at nine with his wife—and going to bed at half-past ten or eleven at the latest, except when they receive company."

"Ah! I wish, my dear Tash," said the Prince, with a sigh, "that you could bring Venetia back to me: but I am very much afraid that all your ingenuity will not suffice for such an achievement."

"I really don't think it would, sir," rejoined the

Captain, as he refilled his tumbler: "for everybody who knows Venetia at all, must be aware that she is a woman of strong mind and has got a will of her own. Take my advice, Prince, and look about you for some other mistress."

"Well, I suppose I must resign myself to that alternative," answered his Royal Highness. "But now, Tash, tell me what I can do for you? In this matter of the lad whom we have just shipped off to the colonies, you have done me a particular favour. I have not told you why I am at all interested in him—I do not mean to tell you—and I know that you are too discreet to ask me any questions——"

"I would sooner shave my monstache and cut off my whiskers," exclaimed Tash, "than display an impertinent curiosity. Whenever your Royal Highness commands, there is at least one who will yield blind and implicit obedience—and that one is honest Rolando Tash. But I think," he continued, again filling his tumbler, "that your Royal Highness was at the moment graciously condescending to ask what you could do for me as a token of approval in respect to my conduct?"

"Well, name your wishes," said the Prince. "But pray be reasonable," he added, laughing; "for if it's money you want, I have devilish little of that commodity to spare. If you would like some little situation——"

"The very thing!" exclaimed the Captain. "The truth is, Prince, I want to settle down in a comfortable and respectable way; and my man Robin also wishes it—and Robin's opinion has great weight with me. I am well nigh tired of frequenting taverns and gaming-houses, and getting into scrapes with constables and watchmen for night-rows and so on—while Robin is equally tired of standing behind lamp-posts or sneaking up into corners and doorways. Besides," added the Captain, lowering his voice to a mysterious

kind of whisper, "I have been seriously thinking of matrimony."

"Matrimony! What, you?" ejaculated the Prince: and he burst out laughing.

"Well, I am glad your Royal Highness can laugh so heartily at last," observed Tash: "for you looked as glum and mopish as a mute at a dead man's door when I came in. But 'pon my soul I am in earnest! Indeed, I never was more in earnest in my life:"—and as if to ratify his words, the Captain refilled his tumbler and tossed off the contents at a draught.

"But are you in love?" inquired the Prince.

"Not I; I never was in love in my life—that is to say, in real sentimental, poetising, moonlight, spoony kind of love. I never wrote sonnets to a lady's beauty, but conveyed my admiration by the far more practical method of giving her a hearty kiss at once."

"Then I presume," continued the Prince, still laughing, "that if you are not in love but mean to marry, you are on the look-out for a lady with a fortune?"

"That is just about the mark," responded Captain Tash. "A lady with some four or five hundred a-year would suit my purpose uncommonly."

"But that is no great fortune, after all," observed the Prince. "Must she be beautiful into the bargain?"

"Well, I cannot say that I am prepared to throw myself away upon an old harridan as shrivelled as a mummy; and at the same time I do not want a silly young creature of sixteen or seventeen, who looks as if she had just left off pinafores and escaped from the nursery. You see, my dear Prince, that a fine-looking man like me—and this I may say without vanity—must have a wife to correspond. In short, Mrs. Tash should be a commanding woman—thirty years of age, or thereabouts—and if I can meet with such a one, I think that I could guarantee becoming a very excellent husband."

"Do you mean me to help you to this acquisition?" asked the Prince: "because I can assure you that it is not at all in my way. Unless indeed," he added, laughing, "it were some cast-off mistress that I wanted to get rid of and provide for."

"Upon my soul, a man may do worse things," answered Captain Tash, "than take a Prince's cast-off mistress. However, as you, sir, have nothing of that sort handy at the moment, we needn't say another word. But to return to what we were talking of—namely, the testimonial of your Royal Highness's approval of my conduct——"

"Ah! that's it," said the Prince. "Well, leave it to me, Tash. You are a good fellow; and I shall provide for you. Come to me again in a few days and we will talk the matter over."

The gallant officer made due acknowledgments for this kind promise, and then took his departure. As soon as he was gone, the Prince seated himself at a side-table where there were writing-materials, and penned a letter to his sister the Princess Sophia, informing her that her son was at length fully provided for, having sailed for the colonies. Scarcely had he sealed and despatched this letter to St. James's Palace, where her Royal Highness dwelt, when a domestic entered to state that Mrs. Arbuthnot solicited an immediate audience of the Prince Regent.

"Ah! I can guess what this is about," he said to himself, with a start of impatience; but deeming it more prudent to see her, he desired that she might be admitted.

CHAPTER CCV.

THE INTRIGUING MOTHER.

When Mrs. Arbuthnot entered the room, she found the Prince seated upon the sofa near the table on which the refreshments were spread; and she instantaneously saw that his look and manner were full of a cold hauteur—a sort of a tacit warning to make her aware that he was in no humour to put up with any "scene." Her demeanour was profoundly respectful, with a tinge of reproachful mournfulness: for she was a thorough adept in all hypocrisies and artifices, and knew full well how to assume an aspect suitable to any occasion or to any circumstances.

The Prince partially rose from his seat—bowed distantly—and waved his hand towards a chair: then without uttering a word, he awaited the explanation of this visit.

"Your Royal Highness will graciously pardon me," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, commencing in the gentlest and mildest tone—for she was desirous to see what humble persuasion would do first, ere she had recourse to the alternative of harsher means,—"your Royal Highness will pardon me for this intrusion; but it is on a very painful matter that I have ventured to approach the representative of my Sovereign."

"Proceed, madam," said the Prince, with a slight bow, and with a glacial courtesy of manner.

"My daughter Penelope," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "is in a way to become a mother; and she is profoundly anxious relative to the future."

"I told your daughter, madam," responded the Prince, "that when the time came that she could no longer conceal her situation——and *that*, from what she told me, will be some months hence——she could easily retire from the Court for a short period, under suitable arrangements, which *your* experience no doubt," he added somewhat ironically, "will enable you to carry into effect."

"Sir, wherefore this species of taunt thrown out against me?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Would you insinuate that I am accustomed to suggest or invent plans to conceal the disgrace of young ladies? If so, your Royal Highness is exceedingly mistaken."

"Madam, I cannot forget the facility with which you lent yourself to the little freak which made me covet your daughter; and therefore I naturally suppose that such pandering pastimes cannot be altogether strange to you."

"Does your Royal Highness mean that my daughter was not pure and chaste when she received you to her arms?" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot, scarcely able to repress her indignation: "or would you imply that through my agency she had been frail before?"

"No—I mean nothing of the sort," answered the Prince. "I do not wish to throw the slightest aspersion on Miss Penelope's honour previous to her intimacy with me. On the contrary, I will even declare my conviction that she *was* pure and chaste, as you express it: but it is not the less a

fact that you yourself intrigued cunningly enough to hand her over to me. Am I not therefore justified in supposing that, as you got her into the scrape, so you will get her out of it? And as I hinted to her last night, if she wants a few hundred pounds, as a matter of course they are entirely at her service. What more can I do? what more do you require?"

"I had flattered myself, sir," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, again relapsing into that coaxing, fawning, toad eating manner which was habitual to her, and had been acquired by a long career of grovelling servility towards all with whom she had lived,—"I had flattered myself that my poor girl would not have been thus discarded by your Royal Highness with scarcely even a kind word——"

"Then I suppose that she has explained to you," interrupted the Prince, "everything which took place between us last evening at Windsor Castle? Now, let me be explicit on my side. From what your daughter said to me it was quite evident she had entertained the loftiest pretensions. I do not exactly know of what nature these may have been, or to what height her ambition soared: but certain it is that she expected some signal reward for having honoured me with her favours. Now, let me tell you, my dear madam," continued his Royal Highness, ironically, "that young ladies generally conceive they are honoured by the circumstance of winning *my* favour; and if I were to shower rewards upon all the sweet creatures who received me to their arms, I should have quite enough to do. Perhaps your daughter fancied that I ought to make her a peeress in her own right—or give her a pension of a thousand a-year. God bless you, ma'am! if all my mistresses were similarly ambitious and mercenary, the world would be perfectly astonished at the number of peeresses I should have to create; and the House of Commons, obedient and ductile as it is, would stand aghast at the frightful increase of the Pension List."

Mrs. Arbuthnot remained silent for upwards of a minute,—not knowing exactly whether to continue arguing the point peaceably, or whether at once to have recourse to harsher and sterner means. The Prince, fancying that he had advanced an argument which had put her to confusion, and indeed confounded her altogether, rose from his seat—bowed stiffly—and was advancing to pull the bell as an intimation that the interview was over,—when Mrs. Arbuthnot said in a somewhat determined voice, "Then your Royal Highness is resolved to do nothing for my daughter?"

"What *can* I do?" he ejaculated impatiently. "The bare idea that she abandoned herself to me from the mercenary motives which have since transpired, is but too well calculated to fill me with disgust; and as I never entertained a very high opinion of the mother, I am sorry to say that I am now led to think with equal indifference of the daughter:"—and again he advanced towards the bell.

"Stay, sir, one moment!" cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, suddenly throwing off all the fawning servility of the hypocritical toad-eater, and putting on a dogged air of resoluteness: "our interview is not quite ended yet!"

"Madam," said the Prince, turning upon her a look of the loftiest disdain, "if you were a man I should ring to order my lacqueys to expel you unceremoniously: but as you are a woman, I cannot treat you with that ignominy. At the same time, permit me to request that you immediately leave the room."

"And were I a man," cried Mrs. Arbuthnot, "I should be induced to flog you with a horse-whip for the baseness and heartlessness of your conduct. As it is, I warn you that I have the power of wreaking a terrible revenge!"

"Now will you explain yourself?" said the Prince, becoming frightened, and scarcely able to conceal that he was so: for he instantaneously saw that Mrs. Arbuthnot would never dare adopt such a demeanour as this and use such words as those, unless fully confident of wielding some terrible weapon of vengeance.

"If your Royal Highness will resume your seat," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, speaking with more calmness, "I will very speedily explain my meaning."

The Prince returned to the sofa, and sat down without saying a word.

"Believe me," continued the Bedchamber Woman, "it is painful—most painful—to be compelled to adopt such a tone as I am now using: but neither I nor my daughter are worms to be trodden upon with impunity. I am in possession of a secret regarding a member of the Royal Family—a secret of such fearful import that if made known, it would strike the whole country—aye, and all the world—with terror and consternation——shall I go on?"

"Yes—explain yourself," answered the Prince, not knowing to what possible circumstance Mrs. Arbuthnot could allude; and unfortunately for him, there were so many important secrets connected with himself and his family, that he was at a loss to fix upon the *one* that was known to his visitress.

"Then I must proceed," she continued; "and it is with pain that I do so. Sir, the secret to which I allude, intimately concerns the honour—the character—and if he were of humbler station, the very *life* of your royal brother the Duke of Cumberland. There is a document in existence——"

"A document!—but of what kind? what does it refer to?" demanded the Prince, nervously agitated.

"Sir, it is a letter which the murdered Sellis——"

"Murdered!" echoed the Prince, instantaneously catching the significancy of Mrs. Arbuthnot's expression. "No—he committed suicide. The coroner's inquest proved it——"

"That your Royal Highness firmly believes the story of the unfortunate man's suicide, I have no doubt," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot: "but there are proofs to the contrary."

"And those proofs?" ejaculated the Prince.

"Listen, and I will tell you everything."

Mrs. Arbuthnot then proceeded to sketch in rapid outline all that she had heard some short time back from Mrs. Bredalbane; and his Royal Highness, to do him justice, was horrified at the complexion which the frightful story now wore, and which involved such tremendous charges, not only against his brother the Duke of Cumberland, but likewise his sister the Princess Augusta. He rose from the sofa and began pacing the room in an agitatated manner—giving frequent vent to

ejaculations which showed how profoundly he felt the terrible things that had been revealed to him. That he himself might have had some distant suspicion of the possibility of his brother's guilt, relative to the death of Sellis, was probable—was even likely: but if so, he must ever have striven to put it away from his thoughts, as a man endeavours to shake off the influence of a hideous dream. But most assuredly the Prince had never suspected that his sister Augusta had been so deeply criminal as he was now forced to believe her. Profligate, unprincipled, heartless, and depraved as he was—saturated with vices—capable of any iniquity in the pursuit of pleasure and in the conquest of female virtue—yet the Prince Regent was not so far removed from humanity and so nearly allied to the nature of a fiend, as to remain indifferent to the details of Mrs. Arbuthnot's disclosures.

On her part, the wily woman saw how deeply the arrow had penetrated, and how excruciatingly its barbed head rankled in the heart which it had pierced; and she chuckled inwardly as she felt that some result beneficial to herself and daughter would ensue from the course she had taken.

"Can you procure that fragment of a letter written by Sellis?" suddenly asked the Prince, as he stopped short in front of where the Bedchamber Woman had remained seated.

"Yes—I can," was her response.

"And you will do so?"

"I will."

"Of course you expect your reward?" continued the Prince. "What is it to be?"

"I am moderate in my ambition," she answered. "All I need is that my own position at the Court shall not be endangered by the exposure of my daughter's shame; and therefore that she herself may be provided for."

"But how?" cried the Prince. "I can give her money—but nothing more. I cannot give her a title; and that is what she was looking after. I saw by everything she said last night that such was her desire. If she were married, it were different: I could do something for her husband——"

"Ah! if she were married it would indeed be easy—I understand!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "You can confer a title—a baronetcy we will say—upon her husband; and it will be precisely the same thing, since the lustre of the rank would be reflected upon her. But how can she marry, situated as she is?"

"Hold!" ejaculated the Prince, a sudden idea striking him: then after a few instants' deliberation, he said, "Mrs. Arbuthnot, if I were to find your daughter a husband who would accept her as she is—knowing that she has been my mistress—knowing also that seven months hence she will become a mother—if I find your daughter such a husband, I ask, will she accept him?"

"Assuredly she will—provided that this husband is at least a Baronet, with an income sufficient to maintain my daughter in comfort, if not in splendour. But," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, "he must not be a man of repulsive appearance: for I know that Penelope would not sacrifice herself to a person who might be loathsome to her."

"On the contrary," said the Prince, his countenance brightening up somewhat as the project which he now revolved in his mind assumed greater consistency and feasibility,—"on the contrary, the gentleman of whom I am now thinking, is good-looking enough; and there are plenty of young ladies who would be well pleased with his appearance. As for the Baronetcy, I promise you he shall have that; and I will likewise guarantee that his income shall not be less than six or seven hundred a-year. Indeed, I will find for him some situation—the Rangership of a park—the post of an Ordnance Store-keeper—or perhaps a Consulship——At all events, something both honourable and lucrative."

"I am perfectly contented with the proposed arrangement," said Mrs. Arbuthnot; "and on Penelope's part I unhesitatingly accept it."

"When will you come with the document in your possession?" asked the Prince. "Let there be no delay. To-morrow, if you will."

"And shall I bring Penelope with me, so that she may be introduced to her intended husband?" inquired Mrs. Arbuthnot, her question plainly proving that she did not mean to give up Sellis's letter unless convinced that the Prince Regent on his part was prepared to carry out the propositions he had made.

"Yes—bring Penelope with you," was his Royal Highness's answer; "and she shall meet her intended here. Let the hour be three o'clock to-morrow."

"At three o'clock to-morrow I shall be punctual with my daughter."

Mrs. Arbuthnot then took her departure from Carlton House,—rejoicing at the success of her visit, and determined in her own mind to purloin the letter of the murdered Sellis from her friend Mrs. Bredalbane's writing-desk. Accordingly, with this very honest intention—and likewise with an almost fevered anxiety to impart the good news which she had for her daughter's ears—Mrs. Arbuthnot hastened back to Windsor Castle.

CHAPTER CCVI.

THE INTENDED HUSBAND.

On the following day, punctually at three o'clock, Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot made their appearance at Carlton House, and were at once ushered into an apartment where they found his Royal Highness waiting to receive them. At once rising from his seat with the most familiar courtesy, and even condescending friendliness of manner, the Prince Regent shook Mrs. Arbuthnot very warmly by the hand; and then throwing his arms around the voluptuously-formed Penelope, bestowed upon her a hearty kiss.

Both mother and daughter were somewhat surprised at this remarkable change in the Prince's manner: for the elder lady had not failed to acquaint Penelope with the freezing reserve which his Royal Highness had at first manifested towards her on the previous day, and how she had been compelled to use threats to bring him to reason. Of course Mrs. Arbuthnot was well pleased to observe this change: and Penelope submitted with a very good grace to the royal caress—although she now in her heart entertained the most cordial hate towards her seducer.

The Prince made the two ladies sit down upon the sofa; and placing himself between them, he

said, with an assumption of the most good-humoured jocularity, "Well, after, all this is really a very pretty drama in which we are engaged. But little did I think until yesterday that I should ever be called upon to play the part of a matrimonial agent. I declare that my observation makes you blush, Penelope! Yet I think that you will be well pleased when you see what a fine husband I have selected for you."

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured," said Miss Arbuthnot, "that it is with no small degree of repugnance I suffer myself to become an object of such indelicate arrangements. Your conduct has however left me no choice."

"I am afraid that I treated you somewhat harshly and cruelly the evening before last, when I saw you at Windsor Castle," said the Prince: "but I had many things to vex me at the time."

"And chiefly of all the loss of Lady Sackville," observed Penelope, with some little degree of bitterness.

"I will not deny that her loss has vexed me cruelly," answered the Prince. "But I see that you are jealous," he added, laughing. "Now this is certainly not a sentiment to be entertained by a young lady who is on the point of marriage with a very fine, handsome, and agreeable man."

"Then your Royal Highness has really exercised a sound discretion in the choice of a husband for my daughter?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot; "I mean, sir, that you have borne in mind the observations I made upon the point, and that you will not offer for Penelope's acceptance an individual whom she may be ashamed to acknowledge as her husband?"

"I hesitate not to say she will be proud of him," answered the Prince. "I assure you he is good-looking, with a fine military air——But tell me, Penelope, do you like moustaches?"

"Sir," replied the young lady, colouring up to the very hair of her head, "there sounds something too much like a tone of banter in your speech, to inspire me with much confidence as to the present proceeding. I am already sufficiently humiliated——"

"Pray do not be angry, my dear Penelope," interrupted the Prince, passing his arm round her waist. "I only sought to make my peace with you by putting on my best possible humour: but if you feel offended, I can of course become as coldly dignified and freezingly haughty as ever I was in my life. I thought it better not to give too business-like and matter-of-fact an air to the present transaction——"

"If that be indeed your motive, sir," responded Miss Arbuthnot, "I thank you for your kind consideration, and beg that you will retain your present humour:"—but while she thus spoke, she gently disengaged herself from the royal arm and moved a little nearer towards the extremity of the sofa.

"My dear madam," asked the Prince, now turning towards Mrs. Arbuthnot, "have you procured the letter of which you spoke to me yesterday?"

"I have, sir," was the answer: and as she spoke, the lady produced the paper which she had succeeded in abstracting from Mrs. Bredalbane's writing-desk.

"You will permit me to look at it," said the Prince. "Not that I mean to keep it," he added, laughing, "until Miss Penelope is introduced to her intended husband: and therefore the moment I have cast my eyes over it, I will return it to you."

"Rather permit me to read the contents to your Royal Highness," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot, with a significant look. "You will find that it is worded precisely as I told you yesterday, and that it is clearly corroborative of the tale told by the valet Joux and which I also described to you."

"Read the letter then," said the Prince, in a short abrupt manner. "You must really think me very dishonourable to suppose for an instant that I would keep the paper if entrusted in my hands, and evade the fulfilment of the bargain entered into between us yesterday."

"Your Royal Highness should neither be surprised nor offended that I adopt the proper precaution," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot in a firm tone. "But listen, and I will read the letter."

With the contents of this fragmentary document the reader is already acquainted: we need not therefore reproduce it here. Suffice it to say that a gloom began to settle upon the Prince's countenance as soon as Mrs. Arbuthnot commenced reading it aloud; and at the mention of that pointed allusion to the Princess Augusta's unnatural criminality, his Royal Highness gave a visible shudder. He said not a word, however, until she had finished; and even then he remained for upwards of a minute absorbed in a moody reverie.

"You two ladies," he at length said, "are acquainted with a secret which vitally concerns the honour of my brother and my sister. Rest assured that I am prepared to fulfil the conditions yesterday agreed upon. I have spoken to a gentleman—an intimate friend of my own—who is willing, Penelope, to become your husband. As I said ere now in a good-humoured strain, and as I seriously repeat at present, he is not one of whose personal appearance you need be ashamed. As for his social position, he already possesses a certain military rank; and here," continued the Prince, producing a sealed document from his pocket, "is a patent drawn out, conferring upon him the title of a Baronet. An appointment, to which is annexed an income of eight-hundred a-year, is likewise at his service. Thus you perceive I am ready to accomplish my part of the bargain without delay. I may add that the gentleman to whom I allude, is at this moment within the walls of the palace, waiting to be introduced to you. In short, he is in an adjoining room. But now, what guarantee have I that when all these conditions are fulfilled, fresh demands will not be made upon me—fresh documents of horror produced—and the threatened exposure of fresh secrets held in terror over me?'

"Prince," answered Penelope, speaking in a firm tone, and looking him full in the face with a calm dignity of demeanour, "I know not what guarantee can possibly be given you in respect to the eventualities to which you allude. But this I solemnly affirm on my own account—all I seek, all I have ever sought, is a position which shall save me from disgrace and poverty. This position your Royal Highness is now about to give me; and I can assure you that mine is not an ungrateful heart. If in every respect your royal word is fulfilled, I would sooner study to do you a service than work you an injury. As for my mother, I believe that her sentiments are precisely the same."

"Penelope has spoken so well, so truly, and so

candidly, upon the subject," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that I have really nothing to add—unless it be to remind your Royal Highness that should either of us hereafter prove ungrateful, the means of revenge are in your own hands. A word from your Royal Highness to the Queen, would deprive me of my situation at Court; and a stroke of the pen would cancel the Government situation to be conferred upon Penelope's husband. Surely, then, these are guarantees sufficient?"

"Yes—or at least I must consider them so," rejoined the Prince. "But as you have proved so exceedingly suspicious of my good faith, and have even exhibited a disinclination to trust that letter in my hands, you cannot be surprised if I should be equally wary and cautious. There is now one more question I have to ask."

"Speak, Prince," said Mrs. Arbuthnot; "and you will see that I am prepared to deal as candidly as possible with your Royal Highness."

"You have not yet told me," answered the Prince, "from whom you received all these particulars relative to that frightful affair, and from whom you procured that document?"

"From Mrs. Bredalbane—one of her Majesty's Bedchamber Women," was Mrs. Arbuthnot's reply.

"Ah! I know her well—a regular old female courtier!" said the Prince, his countenance brightening up: "there is no harm to be anticipated at her hands. Besides," he muttered to himself, "when once that document"—alluding to Sellis's fragmentary letter—"is burnt, the main evidence is gone and the tale shrinks into a mere piece of gossiping tittle-tattle. Well then," he said, again speaking aloud, "I think that we have nothing more to say. But mind, it is understood that when I introduce her intended husband to Miss Penelope, and place in his hands the document conferring the baronetcy, that letter"—and he pointed to the one which Mrs. Arbuthnot held tight between her fingers—"shall be at once given over into my possession?"

"Such is the arrangement for which I myself should have stipulated," said Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"But there is one thing of which no mention has been made," observed Penelope: and the flush of shame appeared upon her countenance as she spoke.

"Ah! I know what my daughter means," exclaimed her mother. "Has your Royal Highness frankly and candidly stated to the gentleman, whom as yet you have not named to us, Penelope's exact position?"

"He knows everything," answered the Prince; "and such is his devotion to me, that he will cheerfully bestow his name upon Miss Penelope. I think that every preliminary is now settled, and that nothing remains to be done save and except to introduce the individual in question."

Thus speaking, the Prince rose from his seat and advanced towards a door at the extremity of the apartment. Penelope and her mother also rose—the former becoming greatly agitated, and the latter whispering hurried words of encouragement in her ears. Penelope accordingly summoned all her courage to her aid; and intensely eager was the look of curiosity and suspense which she now fixed upon the door towards which the Prince was advancing. He opened it—beckoned the young lady's future husband forth—and then turning quickly round as that gentleman made his appearance, exclaimed "Ladies, permit me to introduce Sir Rolando Tash!"

And our friend the Captain indeed it was. Never in his own idea had he looked so blooming or so killing! His frock-coat, one mass of braiding and frogging all over the breast, was pinched in at the waist to such a degree that its wearer was compelled to draw his respirations in the softest manner possible, for fear the hooks and eyes should give way. His grey military trousers had stripes of the broadest gold lace down the legs; and his boots were so brilliantly polished as to be perfect mirrors for every article of furniture in the room. Indeed, as the gallant officer bowed to the ladies as low as his tightly-fitting garments would permit, he caught a glimpse of his hirsute countenance on the surface of either boot. But his hair, his moustachios, his imperial, and his whiskers—heavens! who can describe their magnificence? He would have made the fortune of any *perruquier* in the Burlington Arcade by merely standing in the shop-window for a single half-hour each day. To do the Captain full justice, however, all his hair was his own; and no pains had been spared to give it the richest gloss which bear's-grease could impart, and the finest twist that curling-irons could produce. He wore a pair of dove-coloured gloves; and instead of one gold chain festooning over the outside of his coat, he wore two. The end of an embroidered cambric handkerchief peeped out of his pocket behind; and to close our description, we must not forget to observe that he was as highly perfumed as if he had just been imported from those lands which are said to abound in myrrh, aloes, and cassia.

He was known by sight to both the ladies; and he knew them also: for when watching at the *Green Dragon*, as described in the earliest chapters of our history, he had seen the ladies at Acacia Cottage, and the ladies had seen him coming in and out of the *Green Dragon* aforesaid. So that when the Prince had mentioned to him who the frail Maid of Honour was, for whom a husband was required, Sir Rolando Tash—as we must now call him—had at once jumped at the proposal, inasmuch as he had very highly appreciated the personal qualifications of Miss Penelope. Advancing therefore with the most studied demeanour of affability and jauntiness, Sir Rolando Tash smiled so as to exhibit his white teeth in contrast with the glossy darkness of his moustache; and when he reached the place where the ladies were standing, he literally confounded himself in bows and salutations.

Penelope was willing enough to receive this gentleman as a husband: but perhaps she would have laughed at the manner in which he now accosted her, had not a sense of shame produced a more serious feeling.

"Come, Miss Arbuthnot," said the Prince, "you need not be bashful. My very particular friend Sir Rolando Tash feels highly honoured at the prospect of conducting you to the altar; and if you are equally satisfied to accompany him thither, I do not see why your happiness should be delayed beyond to-morrow. A special license—St. George's, Hanover Square—a *dejeuner*—off in a chaise-and-four to spend the honeymoon at Brighton or Bath—and a paragraph in the newspapers to let the world know what has happened,—these are all that are now required."

"Fair lady," began Sir Rolando Tash, with another low bow, "may I venture to hope that my suit is acceptable, and that you are prepared to follow the kind suggestions of our mutual friend his Royal Highness the Prince Regent?"

Penelope gave her hand to the newly-created Baronet in token of an affirmative response; and her suitor gallantly raised that fair hand to his lips.

"Receive, my dear Sir Rolando, the patent which bestows the title I had already authorised you to bear:"—and as the Prince thus spoke he presented the document to Penelope's intended husband.

At the same moment Mrs. Arbuthnot gave the Prince Sellis's unfinished letter, which his Royal Highness at once consigned to his pocket.

We need not dwell any longer upon this episode in our history. Suffice it to say that Mrs. Arbuthnot and Penelope, on taking leave of the Prince, were escorted by Sir Rolando Tash to the house of their friend Miss Bathurst in Stratton Street; and this lady, upon hearing what was in contemplation, cheerfully received the mother and daughter, and at once volunteered to provide the wedding breakfast for the following morning. Sir Rolando Tash remained to dinner; and as he strove to render himself as amiable as possible, he succeeded uncommonly well—the only peculiarity in his manners which struck the ladies' attention, being the little circumstance that he drank his wine out of a tumbler, and of that wine imbibed no small quantity. However, when he rose to take his leave shortly after ten o'clock, he was evidently as sober as when he had sat down—thus proving that if he were fond of the bottle, the bottle had no particular enmity to him.

On the following morning Penelope became Lady Tash; and while the happy pair were being whirled away in a post-chaise to Bath, Mrs. Arbuthnot sped back to Windsor to resume her duties at the Castle and to communicate her daughter's marriage to the Queen. But ere closing this chapter, we must not forget to observe that the faithful Robin, in his brilliant suit of livery, was seated in the rumble of the post-chaise that conveyed his master and mistress to the fashionable watering-place where the honeymoon was to be passed.

CHAPTER CCVII.

THE BROTHER AND SISTER.

In a neat little parlour on the ground-floor of a pretty cottage in Islington, Ariadne Varian and her brother Theodore were seated. It was in the middle of the day; and the sun was showing off all the gaudy colouring of the flowers in the garden behind the cottage. A Venetian blind, three parts drawn down, mellowed the golden effulgence ere it penetrated into the parlour; and thus there was a subdued light within that room.

Ariadne, who was seated at work with her needle, was dressed in white; and the virgin drapery set off the sylphid symmetry of her tall slender figure with the most bewitching effect. Her flaxen tresses, so soft and fine, fell in luxuriant profusion upon her beautiful sloping shoulders; and as from time to time she lifted her sweet azure eyes, when addressing her brother, who was sitting in a somewhat mournful mood, the lovely countenance of the young damsel wore an expression of immaculate innocence.

Theodore did not speak much. When his sister made a few remarks, evidently with the intention of cheering him, he answered her with all his wonted kindness, but still with a brevity which showed that he was in no humour for conversation—or at all events that his thoughts were far away from the topic on which she addressed him.

At length she said, after a pause which had lasted longer than previous ones, "My dear Theodore, you seem far from happy?"

"You know, my dearest Ariadne, what it is that troubles me. Deeply as I appreciate the kindness of Sir Douglas Huntingdon—immense as the gratitude is which I feel towards him—yet I cannot help abhorring this dependent position."

"I am well aware, Theodore," answered his sister, over whose countenance a slight blush had flitted at the mention of the Baronet's name, "that you have done all you could to obtain another situation since the terrible fate of Mr. Emmerson deprived you of that which you held in his office: but as yet you have not succeeded—and I think that instead of repining at the succour which you have received from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, you ought to thank heaven for having sent you so generous a friend."

"And so I do, Ariadne—and I have just told you so," responded Theodore: "but surely you yourself must feel that it is unseemly—it is even humiliating—to be dependent upon him for the bread which we eat, for the house which we live in, and for the garments which we wear."

"I do feel all *that*, my dear brother," returned the young damsel; "and I wish to heaven that you would permit me to do what I have often and often begged you to allow——"

"What? do needlework for the shops!" ejaculated Theodore. "No, my dear Ariadne, you shall not waste yourself to a shadow, dim your bright eyes, and sew your very winding-sheet, at that crushing wretchedly-paid occupation. I told Sir Douglas the other day, when he called, that I wished to obtain a situation; and he said he would speak to some mercantile friends upon the subject: but he has not been here since, and I fear that he has forgotten it. Do you know, Ariadne," said Theodore after another pause, "that I have but a guinea left of the last sum which Sir Douglas's bounty forced upon me; and when that is gone I shall not know whence to obtain more, unless I procure a situation. Not for worlds could I apply to him again! Day after day have I called at warehouses, answered advertisements, and done everything I could to procure a situation: but, alas! alas! when I mentioned my name, and, as in duty bound, explained all that had happened to me and the dreadful ordeal through which I have passed, those to whom I applied instantaneously looked cold and begged to decline. Ariadne," exclaimed Theodore bitterly, "although I have the document containing my full pardon in my pocket, yet it seems not sufficient to efface the Cain-brand of Newgate from my brow!"

"O heavens, my dear brother!" cried Ariadne, bursting into tears, "talk not thus!"—and putting

aside her work, she rose from her chair, threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him tenderly.

"You are a sweet dear girl," said Theodore, straining her to her breast; "and it is on account of you that I am unhappy. I feel that my position is worse than precarious—it is almost hopeless: and then, in the moments of my deepest despondency, I ask myself again and again what is to become of you. Methinks I shall take another name—conceal the fact that I have been unfortunate—and thus endeavour to get a situation."

"No, no, dearest brother," said Ariadne, who was now standing by his side with her hand upon his shoulder—and she seemed like an angel watching over a denizen of earth,—"you must practise no deception. Let us put our faith in heaven—God will not desert us!"

"Ah! but am I deserving of God's favour?" suddenly exclaimed Theodore, conscience-stricken by the sense of the unmitigated virulence and savage perseverance with which he had hunted a fellow-creature to the scaffold.

"Why do you speak thus?" asked his sister, now gazing down upon him as he remained seated in his chair while she continued standing by his side: "why do you speak thus, I ask?"—for the beautiful girl was totally ignorant of the course which her brother had adopted towards Emmerson.

"My dear sister," he immediately said, giving an evasive reply, "was I not criminal in wronging my employer even to the trifling amount in which I was a defaulter and notwithstanding the peculiar circumstances of the case?"

"Theodore," she answered, the tears again streaming from her eyes, "it was on my account you did that. Oh! I was the authoress of all your sufferings!"

"Angel of purity that you are, accuse not yourself!" ejaculated Theodore, starting from his seat, and again embracing her affectionately. "Come, dry your eyes—I must not see you weep. You know how I love you."

"Yes—and it is because you are such a dear kind brother to me that God will not desert you," said Ariadne.

"Again I say dry your eyes—look cheerful—smile upon me—and we will not yield to despondency. Let us go out for a walk together. I will devote the whole of this day to you; and to-morrow I will recommence my search after a situation. It is impossible but that I must sooner or later fall in with some generous minded man who will view my past misfortunes without prejudice. And now smile, Ariadne," said Theodore, smiling himself in order to win back the wished-for radiance to his sister's angelic countenance.

At this moment a knock was heard at the front door: it was a double knock, and a well known one too—for Theodore immediately exclaimed, "Here is Sir Douglas!"

The colour instantaneously mounted to Ariadne's cheeks—her gentle bosom heaved—and something like a sigh rose to her lips. But her brother observed not all this; for he had turned hastily round to meet the Baronet whom the servant girl had just admitted.

"My dear Theodore, how are you?" said Sir Douglas. "Miss Varian, I hope I find you well. But perhaps I am intruding at this moment?"

"You intrude?—never!" exclaimed Theodore, warmly pressing the hand of his benefactor, while Ariadne's looks unconsciously gave a similar assurance.

"Then, in that case I will sit down," said the Baronet; "not only because I am somewhat tired—having walked all the way hither from the West End; but likewise because I wish to speak to you, Theodore, on some little business. But I dare say you are astonished when I tell you that I have walked? The fact is, when I come to see you I do not like such formal ceremony as driving hither in my carriage or cabriolet: indeed, I should be very much pleased to settle down into a quiet unostentatious mode of life. However, it was not to hold forth upon my own likes or dislikes that I came hither now."

The Baronet had seated himself while thus speaking: Ariadne and Theodore had also resumed their chairs—and both waited with some degree of suspense until Sir Douglas should explain the business to which he had alluded; for they alike thought and hoped it referred to his promise to interest himself in obtaining the young man a situation.

"When I was last here," resumed Huntingdon, "I said something about a mercantile firm with which I am acquainted. It is the head of the establishment who is my friend; and I could not see him before this morning—although I assure you I have called every day for that purpose. I dare swear you fancied I had forgotten it altogether?"

"I have received too many proofs of your generosity," answered Theodore, "to think that you would intentionally neglect your kind promise: but I certainly feared that amid your engagements you had overlooked it."

"And did you think so also, Miss Varian?" asked Sir Douglas, turning his eyes upon the young damsel: but he gazed not on her as he had been wont to gaze on others of her sex;—there was always an expression of respectful admiration in his countenance when he looked upon that fair young creature around whom a halo of innocence seemed to dwell.

"I feared as my brother did," she answered, in a soft tone and with downcast eyes: "for I am well aware that a gentleman in your sphere must have so many things to engage his attention."

"Aye, but perhaps I think more of my friends when absent from them than you give me credit for," he said good-humouredly. "It is not because I remain away from them, that they are absent from my thoughts. However, to come to the point, I have seen Mr. Chapman, the wealthy merchant to whom I have alluded; and I fully and frankly explained to him everything. I must tell you that he has established two or three English agencies on the Continent; and it just happens that at this moment the manager of one of these agencies—I forget where he told me it was—has written to him to say that he requires a confidential young man to be sent to him at once, to supply a vacancy that has occurred in the branch-establishment which he superintends. The salary is a hundred and fifty pounds a year, rising according to the merits of the individual; and as it is entirely for the English correspondence, a knowledge of foreign languages is not needed as a qualification. This situation, Theodore, is at your

service. Indeed it is your's already—and you have got nothing to do but to take my card and go at once to Lime Street and make the arrangements with Mr. Chapman."

Theodore's joy knew no bounds; and Ariadne shed tears of gratitude and delight. The brother and sister poured forth their acknowledgments as well as they were able—for their voices were suffocated, and Ariadne's well nigh lost altogether, in the fullness of the emotions that swelled their hearts.

"My dear friends, I know you feel all you say, and much more," exclaimed the Baronet, who was himself affected. "But haste, Theodore, and be off into the City. Take a cab—never mind this extravagance for once—because I told Mr. Chapman you would call upon him this afternoon. Besides, I want you to come back as soon as you can, as I have made up my mind to pass the rest of the day with you. It is now half-past one o'clock. What time do you dine? Let us say four—and the interval will be ample enough for you, Theodore, to transact your business with my friend Chapman. Ah! now I see that Miss Varian does not like the idea of my inviting myself to dine with you?"

"Oh, Sir Douglas Huntingdon!" she exclaimed, with a sort of enthusiasm excited by her grateful feelings; "if you beheld a sudden change in my look, it is because I felt that we cannot entertain you as we could wish: or else——"

But she stopped short in the sweetest confusion.

"Miss Ariadne," answered the Baronet, "I think that when I was here last I told you how simple my habits have become: the more frugal the fare, the better I shall like it—and therefore do not be uneasy on that account. Now, Theodore, lose no time but be off. I suppose you will permit me to remain here until your return?"

"I am rejoiced that you purpose to do so, responded the young man: and there was a world

of meaning in the look which he threw upon the Baronet—for it was as much as to say, "I am not afraid to leave you alone with my sister; for I know that however gay your life may have been, you experience too generous a feeling and too great a respect for her to cast upon her even a glance tainted with impurity."

The young man accordingly hurried away, and the Baronet was now left alone with Ariadne Varian.

"You can take up your work again if you like," said Huntingdon; "while I will sit here and talk to you."

The damsel gladly availed herself of this permission: for it was with some degree of confusion and with a fluttering heart, that she thus found herself alone with the Baronet. She accordingly took up the work which she had ere now thrown aside—and it was in every respect a relief to be enabled to bend down her eyes upon it.

"Now, Miss Varian," resumed the Baronet, after a brief pause, "tell me whether you approve of this arrangement which I have made for your brother? I do not know whether I have informed him accurately as to the amount of income which he is to expect in the situation placed at his disposal. It may be a trifle more: but I am very certain it is not less. Mr. Chapman would have taken him into his establishment in London if I had chosen; but considering all the circumstances of the past, I thought it better that Theodore should go abroad—at all events for a few years. I am well aware how deeply he feels the past: but all the poignant memory thereof will be effaced when he shall have had a full opportunity of what the world calls *retrieving his good name*. Of course, knowing everything as I do, I may speak thus candidly to you: and now you understand the reasons which have induced me to procure him this situation abroad."

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon, I feel and appreciate the delicacy of your conduct even more if possible than its generosity:"—and the damsel's sweet azure eyes were raised for a moment with a look of heartfelt gratitude; and then they fell again upon her work: but for truth's sake we are bound to say that the stiches she was now making were not very regular, nor such as she herself would have approved of had her thoughts been less confused and more concentrated in her occupation.

"And now you must tell me, Miss Varian," resumed the Baronet, "whether you yourself will like to go abroad?"

"Oh! I would go to the ends of the earth in company with that dear brother," she exclaimed, "who has been so kind to me!"

"Humph!" said the Baronet. "The ends of the earth—eh? Then you are fully prepared to leave England? But you do not answer me. Of course you could not prefer, as a matter of choice, to leave your native land for so long a period? And yet I do not suppose you have any particular tie to bind you to London?"

"I hope," said Ariadne, in a voice which proved how deeply she was struggling to keep down the emotions that were rising up into her throat,—"that you will permit me to see your kind housekeeper, Mrs. Baines, before I leave: for I never can forget her goodness to me while I was at your house."

"Most certainly—you shall see Mrs. Baines," answered the Baronet. "By the bye, I can tell you an anecdote that will illustrate the goodness of that excellent woman's character, and prove how totally free from selfishness is her disposition. I must however preface it by informing you that a fortnight ago I called upon Lady Sackville at Carlton House. It was the very day before she left it for good—and she then gave me to understand that she meant to turn over a new leaf. On that occasion I frankly confessed that I had formed a precisely similar determination;—end now that I recollect, it was on that same afternoon I came up to call upon you. I think, if I remember aright, that I meant to make you a confidante of my resolve, and even consult you in the matter: but I know not what humour it was which seized upon me, inducing me to postpone all discourse upon the subject. When I called upon you again the other day, it was with the same intent: but your brother was here all the time—and so I did not choose to make you my confidante or ask your advice on that occasion. And now for my anecdote about Mrs. Baines. As I was leaving home this morning, I told her that I had something of importance to whisper in her ear. You should have seen how grave and serious the old lady suddenly became: her air had quite a diplomatic mysteriousness about it. She was evidently so proud of being admitted into my confidence and entrusted with my secrets. I began by reminding her that for the last few months I had grown quite steady, and had become a model of temperance and frugality in my habits—that I had renounced the society of all my former companions, and had learnt to hate dissipation as much as, I am sorry to say, I once loved it. Mrs. Baines was pleased to speak in terms of cordial approval, and with a motherly kind of interest too, relative to my altered conduct. I then came to the point, and asked her if she did not think that I should do well to marry——Ah! you have dropped your work! Permit me."

Ariadne had indeed let her work fall; and as she stooped to pick it up, her cheek, which was burning with blushes, for a moment came in contact with the cheek of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had also stooped for the same purpose. She however was the first to snatch up the work, over which her head was immediately bent much lower than before—as if she were trying hard to conceal her countenance as much as possible.

"Well," continued the Baronet, not taking any notice—at least in words—of that transient contact of his cheek against her's,—"on asking Mrs. Baines's advice relative to marriage, she at once declared it was the best step I could possibly take; and she reminded me that of her own accord she had volunteered similar advice some months ago. I bade her observe that if a Lady Huntingdon were introduced into my household, her authority as housekeeper might perhaps be diminished: but she at once declared that she would risk such an eventuality as that. In short, the worthy woman assured me it was her conviction that my happiness would be best consulted by means of marriage; and that if the lady on whom I might fix did not wish to retain a housekeeper, she (Mrs. Baines) would cheerfully resign her post. Now what do you think of that, Ariadne—Miss Varian, I mean?"

"I think," responded the damsel, in a voice that was very low and very tremulous—and she spoke

too without raising her head,—"that Mrs. Baines has acted in a most disinterested manner; but only as I should have expected she would have done, from what I know of her."

"And now tell me, Miss Ariadne," continued the Baronet, "would you also advise me to marry? You do not answer. I must admit that it is a somewhat singular question—or it may appear so at least: but do tell me if you think that I am capable of insuring the happiness of any young lady whom I may love?"

"Yes—if you sincerely love her," replied Ariadne: and now the stitches she was making were a thousand times worse than ever.

"I do love her—I have long loved her!" exclaimed the Baronet. "And now I am resolved to offer her my hand and lay my fortune at her feet! Ariadne, dearest Ariadne—you know whom I mean! Will you be mine?"

Again the work was dropped in the same kind of confusion as before: but this time neither of them stooped to pick it up—for the Baronet caught the blushing girl in his arms and strained her to his breast. That she did not immediately disengage herself was a sufficient proof that she accepted his love, and loved him in return.

When the brother came back from the City, he found the Baronet and Ariadne seated near the window shaded by the Venetian blind: and while there was the radiance of an honest joy upon the countenance of the former, there was the tell-tale blush of a virgin's happy love upon the cheeks of the latter.

"Theodore," Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately said, "while you have been to the City to find a situation, I have found an angel to become my wife. Ariadne has listened to my honourable proposals; and unless you say *nay*, has consented to become Lady Huntingdon."

"Noblest-hearted and most generous of men!" exclaimed Theodore, seizing the Baronet's hand and wringing it with violence in the enthusiasm of his feelings: "how can I ever express my gratitude for what you have done? Ariadne, my beloved sister—sincerely, Oh! most sincerely do I congratulate you upon having gained the affections of Sir Douglas Huntingdon! It is not a mere subordinate situation on the Continent which he has procured me—it is the chief management of that branch-house which I fancied I was to enter as a clerk: and it is an income, not of a hundred and fifty pounds a-year, but of four hundred a-year that I am to receive. Nor is this all. Our benefactor—your future husband, Ariadne—has given security on my behalf in the amount of five thousand pounds to Mr. Chapman——Oh! never was generosity more noble than this!"

Ariadne could not give utterance to a word: she was well nigh overpowered by her feelings;—but taking Sir Douglas Huntingdon's hand, she pressed it to her lips—and that action on her part was ten thousand times more eloquent than all the powers of speech could have been.

It was a happy little party of three that sat down that afternoon to the dinner-table in the parlour of the cottage at Islington; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon perhaps never enjoyed a bliss more real, more sincere, or more satisfactory in all his life. Reader, he did not take his departure that evening until he had received from Ariadne's lips her assent that the bridal should be celebrated at the expiration of three weeks, so that her brother, who was compelled to leave England shortly, might be present at it.

CHAPTER CCVIII.

DR. DUPONT'S ESTABLISHMENT.

At a distance of about two miles from Geneva, there stood a large white building upon the slope of an eminence, situated in the midst of spacious pleasure-grounds, and commanding a beautiful view of Lake Leman. Those pleasure-grounds were surrounded by a very high wall; and the iron gates at the entrance-lodge were always kept carefully shut, opening only for the purposes of egress or ingress. The mansion had evidently been enlarged at different times, and seemed far too extensive for the private residence of even a family possessing enormous wealth. In short, this establishment of which we are speaking, was a private lunatic-asylum.

In one of the many chambers which the establishment contained, two young ladies were seated near the barred window, gazing vacantly forth upon the prospect without. They were well dressed; and the chamber itself was handsomely furnished. Vases of flowers made the air fragrant: fruits and decanters of crystal water were upon the central table. There were musical instruments, books, and pictures, scattered about, but in no unseemly disorder; and an alcove, or very large recess at one extremity of the apartment, contained three couches. Near the door an elderly female, stout in person and very strongly built, was seated. She was engaged in reading a book: but from time to time she glanced towards the two young ladies at the window, evidently to observe what they were doing.

The reader has doubtless already guessed that the two young ladies referred to were Agatha and Julia Owen. Through the generosity of the Princess of Wales,—who had not merely studied, but likewise practised the divine maxim of "Forget and forgive,"—they had been removed from the common madhouse in the Genevese prison to this private asylum, which was kept by one of the most humane and enlightened physicians of the age. Dr. Dupont—a Frenchman by birth—was the proprietor of this establishment; and having all his life studied psychological subjects, he had adopted a regime of mild and indulgent treatment towards his patients, instead of the old system of coercion and cruelty. The consequence was that the strait-waistcoat was seldom used within the walls of this asylum; and as for blows or corporeal punishment, such atrocities were never dreamt of. There were two departments—one for males, and the other for females: and these were subdivided into many chambers, to suit the various degrees of insanity by which the patients were affected, and also any other circumstances of their position. Thus, in the case of the two sisters, one chamber was assigned to them both; and their guardian—the stout woman reading near the door—was ever in attendance upon them. In short, this female keeper acted alike as servant and custodian—waiting upon the young ladies at their meals,

following them when they walked in the pleasure-grounds, and sleeping in the middle bed at night.

When Agatha and Julia were first brought to Dr. Dupont's asylum, they were in a perfectly rabid state of insanity: but the results of kind and humane treatment soon made themselves manifest; and now, at the expiration of six weeks from the date of their admission, we find the two unhappy young ladies in a comparatively composed and tranquil condition. Not that their minds had recovered their healthy equilibrium, or that their ideas were rescued from the whirl of confusion: but the savage instincts which had made them rave in maddened frenzy, and not only threaten their own lives but likewise the safety of all who approached them, were completely lulled down;—and though still deprived of the light of reason, they at least appeared to be harmless!

They knew each other, and were indeed always together. Side by side did they constantly remain. If one rose from the window-seat and approached the table, the other would accompany her: whatever the one partook of, the other selected the same thing. Sometimes Agatha would sit down at the piano and play some air, extemporaneously composed: immediately she quitted the music-stool, Julia would occupy it, and play precisely the same notes. The recollection of all the airs and musical pieces they had once known, was utterly gone: but with the remarkable eccentricity of minds that are aberrated, they could thus remember what each other played at the time. It was the same with the books which lay about the room. If Agatha took up a volume, Julia would take up another: then when Agatha laid aside her's, Julia would take it up instead of her own—while Agatha would instantaneously possess herself of the one her sister had just laid down. They awoke at the same hour in the morning, and without the interchange of a word seemed always to be simultaneously prompted by the same desire as to walking out in the pleasure-grounds, taking refreshments, or retiring to rest. In those two shattered minds there was a wondrous identity of thought and feeling: in those two bruised and almost broken hearts, there seemed to exist a common inclination—an invariable oneness of purpose. They seldom spoke to each other; and when they did, it was in the language of the insane—giving utterance to wild rhapsodies and the strangest notions; and yet they always seemed to understand each other. They would sit for hours, gazing forth from the windows with their eyes apparently rivetted upon the same object in the distance: and yet Dr. Dupont's experience told him that on these occasions they were both alike gazing upon vacancy.

There would have been something deeply interesting, as well as touchingly pathetic, in the case of these two sisters, were it possible to divest the mind of that feeling of loathing and abhorrence which their profligacies and their wickedness were but too well calculated to engender. Indeed, all persons in the Republic of Geneva who were aware of the past history of the two sisters, as developed during the trials of Mrs. Ranger and the three fishers of men, were astonished that the Princess of Wales should have shown so much generosity towards these young women who had entered with such direful purpose into the pay of her enemies;—and the very fact of this excessive benevolence on the part of her Royal Highness, was actually made a handle against her by those who had been led to think lightly of her character. In fact, this unfortunate Princess was always destined to suffer from the seeming imprudence of her generosities,—her very virtues thus raising as it were the voice of accusation against her. So was it in the case of Bergami, whom through motives of goodness she took into her service: and so also was it now in the case of the two young ladies, whom through the sincerest commiseration she placed at her own expense in Dr. Dupont's lunatic asylum. Suspicious people, and those who were fond of gossipping and scandal-mongering, shook their heads knowingly,—saying, "After all, the Princess must have done something in which these girls were her confidantes: otherwise she would not now provide for them so handsomely. But she doubtless fears that if she abandons them altogether, they would turn round upon her if ever they recovered their reason, and would proclaim all they knew."

But to continue our tale. It was, as we have already hinted, about six weeks from the admission of Agatha and Julia into the asylum—and about two months from the date of those dreadful deeds which closed in the fearful catastrophe of their sister Emma's murder—that we now peep into their chamber and behold them seated together at the window. It was the hour of noon; and the September sun was shining gloriously upon the wide expanse of scenery that embraced so many and such varied features of interest. There was the charming city of Geneva—there was that crescent-shaped inland sea—there were the eminences on the opposite shore, dotted with villages, farmhouses, and villas—and there too were the snow-capped Alpine heights in the distance. But the two young ladies beheld naught of all that interesting scene: their eyes were fixed upon vacancy—and there was nothing in their thoughts.

At the same time Mrs. Owen and Mary were wending their way from Geneva towards the lunatic-asylum. A month had elapsed since they had arrived in the republican city; and each day they had called at Dr. Dupont's establishment to ascertain whether that gentleman would permit them to see Agatha and Julia. Hitherto, however, he had been compelled to interdict such a meeting, under the apprehension that it might tend most alarmingly to unsettle the minds of his patients. On the one hand it was possible that Agatha and Julia might not recognize their mother and sister:—but on the other hand it was far more probable that they would; and were such the case, the treatment which Dr. Dupont was pursuing might be seriously interfered with. As a matter of course, Mrs. Owen and Mary had yielded to these representations; but as we have already observed, day after day did they visit the asylum in the hope of receiving a favourable response.

"I have a presentiment," said Mary to her mother, as they approached the establishment on the occasion to which we are now specially referring, "that we are this day to behold my poor afflicted sisters:"—and as she gave utterance to these words the tears rained down her cheeks.

"Do not give way to your affliction in this

manner," said Mrs. Owen, scarcely able to suppress her own convulsive sobs: "you unnerve me—you distract me!"

"My dear mother," I cannot possibly control my grief," answered Mary. "Let us sit down for a few minutes upon this verdant bank, and endeavour to compose our feelings ere we proceed any farther."

The mother and daughter accordingly seated themselves beneath the shade of a wide-spreading tree; and there they gave free vent to that bitter affliction which was rending their hearts.

It was by the side of the main road leading towards Dijon that they were thus seated: and so absorbed were they in their affliction that neither of them heard the sounds of approaching wheels, until a post-chaise, coming from the direction of the French frontier and proceeding towards Geneva, was almost close up to the spot where they were seated. The occupant of the chaise was a young gentleman of genteel appearance and tolerably good-looking. He was moreover an Englishman; and as he happened to be gazing out of the window nearest to the two ladies at the time, he was immediately struck by observing them thus giving way to a grief which was evidently of no ordinary bitterness. He called out to the postilion to stop: and now Mrs. Owen and Mary sprang to their feet—hastily dried their tears—and were hurrying onward to escape the observation which they had thus so disagreeably attracted,—when the traveller, leaping out of the chaise, accosted them with a salutation so courteous and words so polite as well as sympathetic, that it would have been an act of rudeness on their part to have avoided him altogether.

"Pardon me, ladies," said the young gentleman, in the English language; "but if I be not much mistaken in your appearance, you must be fellow-countrywomen of mine: and if so, meeting you thus in a foreign land and seeing you plunged in such bitter grief, I cannot pursue my journey without asking if my services can be made in any way available for your benefit."

"On behalf of my daughter and myself," said Mrs. Owen, with all the courtesy of a thorough gentlewoman, "I return you my sincerest thanks for your kindness and generosity. But ours is an affliction which admits not of relief, even on the part of a friendly sympathizer."

"You will at all events, madam," said the young gentleman, "pardon my indiscretion for having intruded myself upon your notice? Believe me, it was through no impertinent curiosity."

"Such an assurance is altogether unnecessary," answered Mrs. Owen: "and considering the generous interest which you have thus manifested in our behalf, it would be at least discourteous, it not positively unhandsome, to evade an explanation of that grief which elicited your sympathy. Alas! sir, if you be a stranger in these parts, you are unaware that the immense establishment which you may observe on the slope of this eminence on the left hand is an asylum for those who have lost their reason——"

"Ah! pardon me, madam!" exclaimed the young Englishman, observing that Mrs. Owen stopped short in a convulsion of grief, and that Mary had turned aside to conceal the fresh outburst of affliction to which she was giving vent. "Instead of soothing you, I have forced you into explanations which only tend to revive your sorrow. I understand you, madam: you have some relative in that place?"

"I have—I have," answered Mrs. Owen hysterically; and the unhappy woman wrung her hands. "Two daughters—this dear girl's sisters!"—and she pointed towards Mary.

"Enough, madam!" said the Englishman: "dwell not upon the melancholy topic. And now, think me not indiscreet if I again observe that should I in any way be able to prove useful to you, I shall be most happy. Had we met thus in our own native England, and under the same circumstances, I should not have stopped to make those inquiries upon which I have now ventured: but here, in a foreign country, it is different. This, madam, is my excuse for again proffering my services in any way that they could be made available."

"Once more do I return you my sincerest gratitude," answered Mrs. Owen: "but there is nothing that any human being can do to allay our affliction."

The young man made a low bow, and re-entered the post-chaise, which immediately drove on towards Geneva.

"Come, dearest Mary, let us proceed," said Mrs. Owen, as soon as this little incident had terminated. "Was it not kind of that young gentleman thus to display so much interest in our behalf?"

Mary gave her assent to the question; and composing her feelings as well as she was able, accompanied her mother to the gate of the pleasure-grounds belonging to the asylum. The old porter, who immediately came forth from the lodge, and who knew both the ladies well from the circumstance of their calling every day during the past month, immediately said, "I have good news for you on this occasion; the doctor has given orders that if you call you are to be admitted."

"My presentiment was correct!" whispered Mary to her mother. "I knew that we should see my poor sisters to-day!"

"Now, for heaven's sake, my dear child," said Mrs. Owen, when, having passed through the iron gates, they were proceeding up the wide carriage-way to the entrance of the asylum,—"do your best to restrain your feelings in the presence of those whom we are about to see. We know not how pernicious may be the effects of any violent display of anguish on our parts."

"Mother, I will do my best," responded Mary in an almost dying voice: "but the trial will be a severe one!"

They now reached the handsome portico of the edifice, and were at once admitted into an elegantly furnished waiting-room which opened from the spacious entrance-hall. There they were speedily joined by Dr. Dupont, who was an old man with a kind and benevolent look, an air which though mild nevertheless proved him to be capable of great firmness, and a most cheerful as well as winning voice.

"At last, ladies," he said, saluting them with the profound respect of true French politeness, "you are to see those in whom you are so deeply interested. Under my system of treatment they have been brought to the most satisfactory calm-

ness of mind; and although it is impossible to foretell what effect a meeting with you may have upon them, yet I do not feel justified in excluding you any longer from their presence."

"But their reason, doctor—their reason?" exclaimed Mrs. Owen: "think you that it will ever be restored?"

"Madam, I should not be doing my duty," was the grave response, "if I buoyed you up with hopes that may never be fulfilled. I am therefore bound to inform you,"—and he was about to draw her aside so that Mary might not overhear what he was going to say,—"that your daughters——"

"Oh! for heaven's sake let there be no secrets with me!" cried the young maiden. "Suspense under such circumstances were far less tolerable than a knowledge of the worst. Besides," she added, in a quick hysterical tone of mental agony, "I already gather from your looks, Dr. Dupont, a presage of what is passing in your mind."

"Yes—you must speak it in my poor girl's presence," said Mrs. Owen.

"In that case," continued the physician, "it is my painful duty to inform you both that from all the symptoms by which I am enabled to judge, I much fear that the minds of the two young ladies have received a shock which they will never recover."

Mary said nothing, but clasped her hands despairingly; while Mrs. Owen turned aside, and sinking upon a chair, was for some minutes convulsed with grief.

"Now, my dear madam," said the doctor, at length breaking silence,—"and you also, Miss Owen,—I must beg and implore of you both to put as strong a restraint upon your feelings as possible. Remember, I am by no means certain as to the result of the interview which is about to take place. With all my experience I can foretell nothing upon that point. It may prove beneficial, or the very reverse: it may soothe, or it may excite. If my two fair patients recognize their mother and their sister, they will most probably melt into softness, and the effect would be advantageous: but unfortunately, in these cases the very persons who ought to be loved the most, are sometimes regarded as the objects of sudden aversion, hatred, and terror. You will therefore both perceive the absolute necessity for exercising an authoritative command over yourselves at the approaching interview."

Mrs. Owen and Mary promised to follow Dr. Dupont's injunctions as well as they were able; and when he thought they were sufficiently tranquillized, he conducted them out of the waiting-room. They traversed the hall—ascended a magnificent marble staircase—and then proceeded along a carpetted passage having an array of doors on both sides. Presently they stopped at one near the end of the passage: and here the doctor paused, placing his finger upon his lip to remind Mrs. Owen and Mary of the injunctions he had given. He then knocked at the door; and it was almost immediately opened by the female custodian who had charge of the two young ladies. Dr. Dupont entered first—Mrs. Owen and Mary following close behind. The reader may imagine if he can—for we have no power to describe—the feelings which now swelled in the heart of that mother who knew that she herself was the primal cause of everything which had hurried on her two unhappy children to the catastrophe of a madhouse: nor can we depict the emotions which the innocent and tender-hearted Mary Owen felt at thus encountering her sisters in such a place and under such circumstances. The mother and daughter had wept over the tomb of the murdered Emma in the cemetery without the walls of Geneva; and deep as their anguish had been *there*, it assuredly was not more profound than that which they experienced in crossing the threshold of the chamber containing the living Agatha and Julia—but living only in a state of mental confusion!

The two objects of this visit were still seated at the window—still appearing to gaze forth upon the splendid scenery without—but still looking upon dull vacuity. They heard not the door open; or if they did, paid no attention to the circumstance. Dr. Dupont motioned with his hand for Mrs. Owen and Mary to remain near the door, while he accosted Agatha and Julia.

"Well, young ladies," he said in his blandest, kindest, most soothing tones, "what is it that thus engages your attention?"

"Methought I beheld angels flying through the air," said Agatha, slowly turning her head and raising her eyes towards the physician's countenance. "They were all beautiful beings, with white wings shining as if made of silver; and they were dressed in azure garments which streamed out in a long train in the track of their feet."

"And I also beheld beautiful spirits passing through the air," said Julia, turning round with the same slowness of manner and gazing up with similar vacancy into the doctor's countenance. "I fancied also that they had beautiful silver wings, and azure robes spreading out into a cloud behind them."

Mrs. Owen and Mary were now able to behold the countenances of Agatha and Julia, and hear their voices. Those countenances were so pale as to be devoid of all vital colouring: and those voices were so low, plaintive, and melancholy, that it rent the hearts of the mother and sister to hear them. But still they subdued their feelings with a strength of mind that even astonished themselves; and now at a signal from the physician, they slowly approached the window.

"Here are friends, come to see you," said the doctor, his voice more gentle and more soothing than even at first: and yet both Mrs. Owen and Mary could perceive in his accents, as well as in his manner, that this was the crisis which he feared—that is to say, the moment was now come when the effect of the visit would be immediately shown by his two unfortunate patients.

Agatha and Julia—at the same instant, in precisely the same manner, and as if in obedience to a feeling common to them both—slowly averted their looks from the doctor's countenances, and bent them upon Mrs. Owen and Mary. Then they both started, as if suddenly galvanized by the same electric wire, and also at the very self-same moment: and still as if inspired by this singular identity of feeling or instinct, they sprang from their seats, shrieking forth, "It is Mary, our sister!"

Bounding towards the young damsel, they both wound their arms about her neck—covered her with fervid, even frenzied caresses—addressed to her themost passionately endearing epithets—and shed

floods of tears. Then Agatha embraced Mary all to herself—and then Julia took her turn in the same demonstration of enthusiastic love.

"Oh, my sisters—my dearest, dearest sisters!" exclaimed the young damsel, giving back those fond caresses with an equal fondness.

"Come and sit down with us," said Agatha, "and tell us where you have been. It is so long since we saw you!"

"Yes, come and sit down with us," echoed Julia, "and tell us where you have been. It is so long since we saw you!"

"Dearest sisters," answered Mary, almost blinded by her tears and suffocated with her sobs; "here is our mother come to see you also."

"Yes, my poor girls—it is I, your mother—your almost heartbroken mother!" exclaimed Mrs. Owen, rushing forward to embrace her two afflicted children.

"What? *you* our mother!" shrieked forth Agatha, her whole appearance changing with an awful suddenness, as if the spirit of a fiend had in a moment entered her frame. "No, no—not you our mother! You are a demoness—a she-devil—an old witch—a vile monstrous hag! I know you well. Avaunt! avaunt!"

"No, no—you are not our mother!" were the thrilling echoes that now rang piercingly from the frenzied Julia's lips: "you are a demoness—a she-devil—a hideous hag. Avaunt! I know you well—avaunt!"

And then the two sisters, taking each other's hand, stood side by side, as if in the reliance of mutual protection against that mother whom they did not recognize, but whose presence had thus so terribly excited them. As for Mrs. Owen herself, she covered her face with her hands—staggered back against the wall—and sobbed aloud; while poor Mary stood at a little distance, transfixed with horror and dismay.

"My dear young friends," said Dr. Dupont, accosting Agatha and Julia, "you have recognized your sister—are you not glad to see her? And will you not believe me when I assure you that the other lady is your mother?" he added very slowly, and earnestly watching the looks of his patients.

"Our mother!—no, no!" again shrieked forth Agatha, all the frenzy of rage blazing up again in a moment. "I tell you she is not our mother!—she is the old demoness who has made us do everything that is wrong!"

"Yes—the demoness who has made us do everything that is wrong!" were the terrible reverberations thrilling from Julia's lips.

"O God, have mercy upon me!" cried Mrs. Owen: and not observing the imperious signal which Dr. Dupont now suddenly made for her to withdraw, she sprang forward—threw herself upon her knees at the feet of her two lost and ruined children—and with wild looks and outstretched arms, shrieked forth, "Pardon me, pardon me, my deeply injured daughters!—forgive your miserable, miserable mother!"

Strange was the effect now suddenly produced upon Agatha and Julia: the expression of frenzied horror slowly faded away from their features—their eyes lost the maniac fires which they had ere now flashed forth—and the increasing placidity of their looks indicated a slowly returning tranquillity of mind. The doctor, who had been upon the point of ordering Mrs. Owen forth from the room—or even dragging her thence if she would not leave of her own accord—now watched with the deepest interest and attention this new phase in his two young patients' conduct; while Mary looked on with heightening hope in her bosom. Nor was even the stout female custodian indifferent to what was passing; and Mrs. Owen still remained upon her knees—while her two deeply-wronged daughters were looking down upon her with a gradually increasing clearness and lucidity of gaze. There was something touchingly poetic and beautifully statuesque in the attitude which each of the two sisters took, as thus side by side and hand in hand, they stood with their eyes bent down on their parent's upturned countenance. And for more than a minute did this strange scene last, amidst a profound silence. The attitudes and the looks of Agatha and Julia were identical—they were exactly the same: and it seemed as if it were but one mind influencing the two animated forms.

At length Agatha slowly raised her disengaged hand to her brow, to which she pressed it as if to collect or steady the thoughts that were agitating confusedly in her brain: and precisely at the same moment, and with the same slow gesture, did Julia raise also the hand which she had disengaged, and place it in a like manner to her white forehead.

Dr. Dupont flung a quick glance upon Mary and the female keeper, as if to intimate that this was the crisis upon which everything depended. And a crisis indeed it was—but one the turn of which was little foreseen by any individual present!

"O God, it is indeed our mother!" suddenly shrieked forth the two sisters, both at the same instant, and in blending tones of the wildest frenzy.

But the next instant Agatha staggered back, with a ghastly paleness suddenly seizing upon her, and fell heavily upon the carpet,—the blood flowing from her lips.

"Great heaven, she is dying!" shrieked Mary, rushing towards her eldest sister.

"No, no—keep back, keep back!" screamed Julia, forcibly pushing Mary away: and then she threw herself upon the panting, convulsing form of Agatha.

All was now horror and distress on the part of Mrs. Owen and Mary: for it was but too clear that the unfortunate Agatha had burst a blood-vessel. The doctor and the female keeper forcibly removed Julia from the dying sister to whom she clung: but, Oh! more horror—more distress—more terror and dismay!—was the blood on Julia's lips but the stain of that flowing from Agatha's mouth? or was it her own life-blood oozing forth from the fountains of a bursting heart?

The two sisters were speedily placed each on her respective couch; and all that human skill could do for them was performed by Dr. Dupont. Vain endeavour! The same excitement had produced in each the same effect; and both were dying. Mrs. Owen and Mary were well nigh frenzied with grief. They first bent over one, then over the other, of those loved beings on whom death was laying its hand; and in the physician's looks they beheld no hope. Neither Agatha nor Julia spoke another word: but about twenty minutes after the bursting of the blood-vessels which sent the stream

of life pouring from their lips, they made a movement, each upon her own couch, as if seeking to clasp something in their arms. By this action they turned themselves towards each other; and with a last expiring effort they stretched out their arms to one another: then closing their eyes, they sank imperceptibly into that sleep from which on earth there is no awakening!

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It was in the forenoon of the second day after this catastrophe, that Mrs. Owen and Mary entered alone together into the chamber of death, and knelt down by the side of the couch on which the two dead sisters lay. They had both been placed upon the same bed,—Dr. Dupont, with what may be termed a poetic delicacy of sentiment, symbolizing in this arrangement that identity of feeling which had made the two sisters cling to each other from the first moment they had entered his asylum. There they lay, stretched out in the garments of the grave—the snowy whiteness of the shrouds being not whiter than the marble countenances of the dead girls. Yes—side by side they lay, like two alabaster statues carved upon the same monument.

Their features, fixed in the sleep of death, wore looks serene and placid: the world's cares ruffled them no more;—the passions which had stirred their frail natures, excited them no longer: they seemed indeed as if no other expression than that of innocence had ever been upon their faces. Life's storm had sunk into an utter lull, beneath the palsying hand of Death.

And by the side of that couch where the two sisters thus lay motionless and statue-like, side by side, knelt the mother and the surviving sister. There was no passionate outpouring of frenzied affliction now; and the solemn silence of the chamber of death was broken only by the low, half-subdued, but not the less convulsing sobs which indicated the well nigh suffocating grief of those anguished mourners. Long did they kneel there, by that bed on which the two departed girls lay stretched:—and in the depths of their souls they prayed fervently and with a most unfeigned sincerity. Poor Mary had naught wherewith to reproach herself: but the mother—the wretched, miserable mother—had everything in the form of dire remorse to lacerate her heart. Then did she feel that in this world there may be condign punishment for wrongs perpetrated and sins committed: for her conscience was bitter and merciless indeed in its self-accusings.

They quitted the room at length, having taken a last long look at the countenances of the dead—those countenances to which they also pressed their lips. It was with slow and mournful pace—as if with leaden limbs dragged along painfully—that they thus issued from the chamber. But when they reached the passage outside, having noiselessly closed the door behind them, all the wildness of their grief burst forth; and for some minutes they leant against the wall, weeping and sobbing, and giving vent to the most agonizing lamentations. Then they slowly passed away; and entering the hired vehicle that was waiting for them at the gate, returned to their lodgings in Geneva.

Three days afterwards the remains of the two sisters were consigned to the same grave where the murdered Emma already slept: but no pen can describe the paroxysm of mental anguish which the surviving sister and the miserable mother endured when they beheld the two coffins consigned to the last home of the dead ones.

CHAPTER CCIX.

LAKE LEMAN.

A few days after the funeral, Mrs. Owen and Mary, attired in their deep mourning garments, embarked on board the packet-vessel which plied between Geneva and Lausanne. It was ten o'clock in the forenoon; and the weather was inclement and threatening. The sky was overcast with dark clouds; and a sombre gloom appeared to rest upon the slopes and eminences on the farther shore of the lake, thus giving a cheerless aspect to the scenery that in the sunshine was wont to be so fresh, so varied, and so beautiful. It was a small vessel, and there were but few passengers on board: but amongst them was one who surveyed Mrs. Owen and Mary with mingled interest and attention. This was the same young Englishman whom they had encountered a fortnight back, when on their way to Dr. Dupont's asylum. He saw that they were in mourning, and observed also the deep affliction that was expressed in their looks: he therefore naturally concluded that some calamity, greater even than any they had anticipated at the time he met them, had since occurred. But from motives of delicacy he did not like to obtrude himself upon their notice; and therefore from his station at a short distance on the deck, he stood regarding them with mingled curiosity, interest, and commiseration.

The beauty of Mary, which was apparent despite the grief that consumed her at the time, had struck this young gentleman on the occasion when, alighting from his post-chaise, he had accosted her mother and herself on the high road to Geneva: and more than once during the fortnight which had since elapsed, had her image recurred to his mind. Notwithstanding the sympathy which her present appearance, in mourning and in visible grief, excited in his breast, this feeling was not without a mingled sentiment of pleasure at beholding her again; and the longer he gazed upon her sweetly beautiful and pensive countenance, the deeper was the interest which he felt on her behalf. Presently it struck him that the captain of the vessel might happen to know who the young lady and her mother were; and as he had found, when first coming on board, that the captain happened to understand a little English, the young gentleman accosted him and made the inquiry concerning the two ladies. The captain did happen to have learnt who they were: for the whole transactions with which the name of *Owen* was so painfully associated, had all along sustained a considerable excitement in Geneva. The captain therefore was enabled to gratify the young Englishman's curiosity: and as he himself had already heard much of what related to the unfortunate affairs wherein the name of Owen was mixed up (save and except the deaths of the two sisters

themselves) his interest in the lady and her daughter was still more excited than at first. He now however learnt from the captain's lips that the two girls Agatha and Julia, whose names had been so unfortunately blended with the horrible occurrences at Geneva, had recently died; and therefore the reason of the mother's and surviving sister's mourning weeds was now no longer an enigma.

The passage from Geneva to Lausanne is not a long one, the distance by water being scarcely thirty miles: and at the expiration of three hours the port of destination was nearly reached. During this interval Mrs. Owen and Mary had remained seated on the spot where they had placed themselves when first embarking; and being the whole time engaged either with their mournful reflections or else in the melancholy discourse to which those thoughts led, they took no notice of any of their fellow-passengers. They therefore had not perceived the young Englishman on board; and Mary little suspected she was the object of so much sympathy and interest. Nor had they even observed that the aspect of the heavens had been gradually getting more dark and menacing, and the waters of the lake more troubled. Suddenly the clumsily-built vessel began to toss and heave in a manner that all in a moment produced a perfect consternation on board. Several of the passengers were thrown off their feet; and two or three narrowly escaped being pitched over the bulwarks. The women screamed—the men gave vent to ejaculations of alarm—and the captain issued his orders to the sailors with a rapidity of utterance and a vehemence of gesticulation which fully proved his conviction that some danger was imminent. Mrs. Owen and Mary were startled from their mournful reveries, and they flung anxious looks around to ascertain the cause of the sudden alarm and the peril which occasioned it.

An individual at once sprang to their side, earnestly bidding them hold fast to the back of the seat, which was fixed upon the deck: and they immediately recognized the young Englishman who had shown so much politeness and sympathy towards them on a former occasion.

He himself, being a stranger in Switzerland, was altogether unacquainted with the nature of the impending danger: but we may as well at once explain it to our readers. Lake Leman is at certain seasons of the year subject to a sudden agitation of its surface produced by sub-aqueous winds,—these winds blowing with much violence from the depths of the lake, and stirring up the mass of water into high and dangerous billows. Whenever this phenomenon discloses itself, squalls from the south usually follow without much loss of time; and these often sweep with terrific fury over that inland sea. It was to guard against the effects of any abruptly arising gust, that the captain had issued such quick orders and with such vehement gesticulation,—so that the sails might be furled, the top-masts struck, and every precaution adopted against whatever emergency should arise.

Nor was the danger long in manifesting itself with frightful reality. For while the clumsy vessel was tossing and pitching on the upheaving billows, the clouds above the mountains of Savoy far away to the south, seemed suddenly to part in twain; and then the next moment—or indeed quick as the eye can wink—the wildly gushing blast swept with terrific violence over the surface of the lake. Immediately the packet-ship heeled over and fell completely on its broadside, the top of the mast touching the water. Terrific cries and piercing shrieks rent the air; and in a moment nearly every soul on board was struggling in the lake, battling for life amidst the waves. The careering billows seemed rushing madly on, dashing over the sinking ship, and then suddenly merging into one vast whirlpool, in which the drowning and the swimming were for a few instants swept round and round as if they were mere straws upon the surging eddies. The captain and the sailors had alone managed to cling fast to the ship at the instant she went over: but they were now fighting for their own lives amidst the dangers of the wreck and against the fury of the storm, so that they were unable, even if willing, to render any assistance to the passengers.

The catastrophe was witnessed from the shore at the foot of the eminence on which Lausanne is built; and two or three boats speedily put off. But in the meantime the greater number of the passengers — men and women — had been engulfed in the depths of that boiling lake; and amongst them was Mrs. Owen. Mary was however caught in the arms of one who swam with strength and expertness; and encumbered though he were by the fair object of his solicitude, it nevertheless seemed as if he acquired additional energy from the feeling of responsibility that *her* life as well as his own depended upon his coolness, his presence of mind, and the exertions he might make. Fortunately Mary was insensible; and thus she marred not his progress, nor increased the danger of both their predicaments by wildly clinging to him, as she would instinctively have done if in full possession of her senses. Sustaining her in one arm, he struck out with the other,—his eye fixed upon the nearest boat that was approaching from the Lausanne shore; and luckily when the violence of the gust had expended itself the waves ceased to break in surges around him, but rolled only in a long continuous swell. To be brief, he succeeded in meeting the boat, into which his inanimate charge was first lifted by the two fishermen who rowed the little bark; and in a few moments he also was in safety.

The packet-vessel went down, causing a fresh whirlpool and then a heavy swell: but the captain, together with his sailors and some eight or ten of the passengers, including three or four women, were rescued from a watery grave by the boats which had put off. Full of an intense anxiety was the glance which the young Englishman flung around upon the survivors of the catastrophe when all who could be saved *were* saved and safe in the boats: but amongst them he beheld not Mrs. Owen, and he therefore knew—as indeed he had already suspected—that she was amongst the missing.

Before the boats reached the landing-place on the Lausanne shore, Mary awoke to life; and as her senses returned, accompanied with painful sensations and short convulsive gaspings, the light of memory also burnt up again. It was with a strange and startling suddenness that she sprang up from the half-embrace in which the young Englishman held her, and threw a wild glance around. The other boats were close by that in which she and her companion were: and with one brief sweeping look did she learn the worst. Her mother was not to be seen! Then she flung her horrified glance upon the Englishman; and in his countenance she read the fatal confirmation of the truth. Her mother was gone—and not more piercing was any shriek that had ascended up to heaven from the engulfed passengers at the moment the vessel upset, than was the wild scream which now thrilled forth from the lips of the orphan girl. But while it was still vibrating in the air, she fell suddenly—deprived of consciousness—as if stricken by a thunderbolt; and was caught in the arms of him who had saved her from the waters of Lake Leman.

When she again recovered her senses, she found herself lying in a bed in a well-furnished room, with a physician and a nurse by the side of the couch. She was in an hotel at Lausanne, whither the young Englishman had borne her, and where he had surrounded her with all the requisite attentions. But on thus re-awakening to consciousness, poor Mary felt that she had better have perished in Lake Leman than have been rescued only to experience the orphan's fate. Her grief for the loss of her mother knew no bounds; and she seemed beyond all consolation.

Thus three or four days passed: but at length the violence of her anguish diminished—not because she felt less than at first, but because she perceived the necessity of resigning herself to the will of heaven. Moreover the thought gradually stole into her mind that the more she gave way to her affliction, the longer would she remain dependent upon the kindness of the generous-hearted friend who had not merely saved her life, but was continuing to manifest so sincere an interest in her behalf. There was another reason, too, which urged her to summon all her fortitude to her aid: and this was the discovery of her mother's corpse,

which, together with those of several of the other unfortunate passengers, had been washed ashore. Accordingly, on the fourth day after the catastrophe Mary quitted her chamber; and now she met her kind friend for the first time since she had been borne to the hotel. We will not pause to detail the terms in which she expressed her gratitude to this young gentleman: suffice it to say that even in the depth of her affliction, he discovered traits in her character which rivetted the sympathy he had previously experienced in her behalf, and convinced him she was altogether very different in conduct and in principles from her three unfortunate sisters who lay buried in the cemetery at Geneva. On the present occasion, also, was it that Mary for the first time learnt the name of the Englishman—and this name was Theodore Varian.

In the most delicate manner did Theodore beseech Mary to entrust him with the superintendence of her mother's funeral; and the poor girl was too grateful for the offer not to yield a ready assent. When the obsequies were over, her mind speedily recovered much of its former firmness of tone: for when she was enabled to sit down and reflect, in the solitude of her own chamber, upon the catastrophe which had left her an orphan in the wide world, the conviction insensibly grew upon her that after all it might be a humane and wise dispensation of Providence. For how could Mrs. Owen have ever enjoyed an hour's tranquillity upon earth again, after the frightful tragedies which had deprived her of her three eldest daughters? As for happiness—*that* never could have been her lot!—and to have lingered on a miserable existence, dragging herself as it were over the thorny pathways of remorse,—Oh! such a fate would have been awful indeed!

It was such a train of meditations as these which led poor Mary to accept with resigned feeling her own orphan destiny; and the longer she reflected thereon, the more serene grew her martyrized mind. But now what course was she to adopt? The boxes containing her clothes and the money which her mother had brought with her from England, had been engulfed in the lake: but the generosity of Theodore Varian, delicately exercised through the medium of the landlady of the hotel, had not only furnished Mary with all the funds requisite for the refitting of her wardrobe, but likewise for the disbursement of the funeral charges and the hotel expenses. Even to the doctor's fees and the nurse's wages, everything was liquidated. Of course it was neither consistent with Mary's sense of delicacy or good feeling to continue dependent upon the young Englishman any longer than her circumstances rendered necessary. But whither should she go? What should she do? Her eyes were naturally directed towards England, where her aunt Miss Stanley would, she knew full well, receive her with open arms, and where she was sure of experiencing a cordial welcome and sweet sympathy from her cousins Lady Sackville and the beautiful Louisa.

She accordingly took an early opportunity of making Theodore Varian acquainted with her intentions, which he of course could not possibly oppose. When she had done speaking, he gazed upon her pale but beautiful countenance with a look of tender interest and admiration;—and then, taking her hand, he spoke in the following manner:—

"Miss Owen, we are about to part; and you will forgive me if under the very peculiar circumstances of the case, I address you in language which, in the afflicted state of your mind, only such circumstances as those to which I have alluded could possibly warrant. We must not regard each other as the mere acquaintances of a few days. All that has happened has tended to level the formalities of months and years, and to make us friends. But there is a still more tender feeling than even friendship in my heart; and if your affections were previously disengaged, perhaps when you have leisure and inclination to reflect upon what I now say, you will write to me from England and tell me candidly and frankly whether you think that by accepting me as your husband, you will be contributing to your own happiness? I seek no answer now: very far am I from pressing you for one. Nothing, I repeat, but the peculiar circumstances under which we have met and under which we are about to part, could justify me in even making this avowal of attachment when all your griefs are fresh in your soul."

Theodore paused; and though Mary spoke not, but looked down with tearful eyes, yet the blush which rose to her cheeks, and the trembling of her hand which she suffered to remain in his own, gave him the gratifying assurance that his suit was not rejected.

"I am established in Geneva," he said, "as the manager of a mercantile emporium connected with a great commercial firm in London. It was business relating to my affairs at Geneva which made me a passenger to Lausanne on board the ill-fated packet the other day. I shall return to Geneva immediately I have seen you safe on your journey away from Lausanne. My address at Geneva I shall beg leave to place in your hands: and pardon me—pardon me—if I say that the days and the weeks will be counted with some degree of anxiety and suspense until I receive a letter from you. You tell me that you are going to seek an asylum with kind relatives whom you have in England? I also have a very dear, dear relative in our native land—a sister—who has recently been married to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. They reside in London; and should unforeseen circumstances place you in a position to desire a home with an affectionate friend, my sister Ariadne will receive you with open arms for my sake. You will allow me to give you a letter to Sir Douglas and Lady Huntingdon—it may be serviceable."

"Mr. Varian," answered Mary, now at length breaking silence, but speaking in a voice which showed how deeply she was moved by the kind language, the delicate manner, and at the same time the frank avowal of Theodore,—"in the same way that peculiar circumstances have led you to address me in terms which are not only flattering but also deserve my sincerest gratitude, so must I be held exonerated from indiscretion if I respond with equal candour. You have saved my life: it is a life, then, that I owe you. But you have not only saved this life of mine—you have done all that a generous friend could do to make it tolerable in the first hours and days of my bitter anguish. I feel—Oh! I feel the immensity of the obligation which I owe you: yes—and I feel also,"

she added, her voice sinking until it became scarcely audible with mingled confusion and deeply stirred emotion, "that it would give me happiness to be permitted to devote my life to the study of your's. Mr. Varian, I will write to you so soon as I reach England: and—and—— Need I say more?"

"No, no—I ask you to say no more," exclaimed Varian, now delighted with the certainty that not merely his suit was accepted, but that he might even rely upon possessing the young maiden's love when time should have mellowed her grief sufficiently to allow room in her heart for the more tender sentiment: then quickly moderating or rather controlling the enthusiasm of his joy—any prolongation of which would be, he delicately felt, unsuitable to Mary's position after the severe losses of sisters and mother which she had so recently sustained—he said, "But before we separate there is one circumstance of my life which in all honourable frankness I am bound to explain; and if after hearing my recital," he continued in a voice that gradually grew desponding, "you should wish to recall anything that I may have construed into approval of my suit, do so—do so—although you would leave me wretched indeed!"

Mary gazed upon him in surprise: but though she said nothing, her hand still lingered in his own—and therefore he went on. The reader has already divined what statement it was that Theodore Varian had to make. It was the narrative of those circumstances which had led to his temporary imprisonment in Newgate—his trial—his condemnation—his escape—and his pardon. But as he continued to speak—explaining how, for his sister Ariadne's sake, he had been guilty at the time of those little defalcations which had produced all his misfortunes—he saw the young damsel's eyes again filling with tears, but her looks beaming through with a deepening sympathy; and the cloud of apprehension was rapidly dissipated from his mind.

When he had brought his tale to a conclusion, Mary said in a low trembling voice, "Mr. Varian—Theodore—you need not wait for the first letter which I shall write to you from England, for the assurance that in due time I will become your wife! No—I give you that promise now; and the life which you have saved shall be devoted to efface from your mind the memory of all your past misfortunes."

Theodore Varian raised to his lips the hand which trembled in his own; and this was the happiest moment of his life. Half-an-hour afterwards the post-chaise which he had ordered for Mary's accommodation, drove up to the door of the hotel; and as he presented her with a pocket-book containing her passport, he delicately intimated that she would likewise find therein the funds requisite for her journey back to England.

They then parted;—and while the post-chaise rolled rapidly away in one direction, Theodore Varian proceeded in another conveyance and by another road back to Geneva.

CHAPTER CCX.

THE DELICATE COMMISSION.

It was about half-past eight o'clock in the evening; and the Prince Regent was alone in one of the private apartments of Carlton House, awaiting with some little degree of anxiety the arrival of a person whom he was expecting. Presently his confidential valet Germain made his appearance, introducing a female enveloped in a handsome cloak and with a veil drawn over her features. The valet retired; and the Prince Regent motioned his visitress to be seated—an invitation which she accepted with some degree of awkward diffidence, as if she felt rather uncomfortable at being in the royal presence. But speedily recovering herself—for she was a woman of no small amount of assurance—she lifted her veil, and revealed a countenance so matronly and honest in look that his Royal Highness could not help exclaiming, "Why, there must be some mistake. You surely are not——"

"Mrs. Gale of Soho Square, at your Royal Highness's service," responded the woman, assuming her blandest tone.

"Then that is all right," said the Prince, flinging himself indolently upon a sofa. "But you know, my worthy creature," he continued, "one is apt to fancy that the peculiar calling or avocation of persons gives a certain impress to their features, and that one may judge of them thereby. I am a pretty good physiognomist; and if any dozen people were marshalled before me, I think I could pick out the cunning lawyer, the astute barrister, the sanctimonious parson, the self-sufficient pedagogue, and so forth. As for the female tribe, I grant you that the task of discrimination is a trifle more difficult—because they are such adepts at throwing the veil of hypocrisy over all their proceedings as well as over their thoughts, passions, and feelings. It is no ill-compliment to you—but on the contrary, a very delicate piece of flattery—to declare that from your personal appearance no one could possibly detect the pleasant and agreeable courses of life which you follow, and in which, from all I have heard, you are so admirably proficient."

"I feel honoured by your Royal Highness's remarks," returned Mrs. Gale. "As a matter of course, it was to put my abilities to the test that your Royal Highness has sent for me hither?"

"Just so," rejoined the Prince. "Help yourself to a glass of wine there, Mrs. Gale; and listen while I proceed to explain myself. The truth is, I am devoured by what the French call *ennui*—and that is to say, there are no pleasures which now seem to give me any gratification. Some of the finest and handsomest women in the land have at different periods contributed to my happiness: but the handsomest and the finest of them all is gone, to return no more—and she has left a void which I am anxious to fill up. Now, I am wearied of what may be termed the facility of success: there is such a sameness in always triumphing the moment the overture is made or the proposal is whispered in the ear of the coveted fair one. As a matter of course if I cast my eyes around the circle of my female acquaintance, my thoughts

can settle upon many who would throw themselves into my arms at the first encouraging look I might give: but these are really no conquests. There is nothing in such amours to pique the passion—nothing to afford the imagination scope for luxurious revelling. Desires that are gratified immediately they are formed, are sated as it were even before the moment of enjoyment: and thus all these gallantries with fair ones who surrender themselves up the instant they receive the first glance of encouragement, are devoid of excitement, and seem stale, flat, and utterly destitute of pleasing novelty. In plain terms, Mrs. Gale, I want a change."

"And in what manner can I assist your Royal Highness?" asked the woman: "for amongst the various ladies of my acquaintance, I cannot at the moment fix my eyes upon any whose virtue is not of the easy character you yourself have described."

"I will explain myself more fully, Mrs. Gale," resumed the Prince. "I have already said that I long for some charming novelty. It is now for you to devote a few days to seek after something of this sort. Endeavour to find out some lovely, elegant, and virtuous girl, who not merely requires wooing, but even some more serious trouble, to the achievement of the conquest. I want excitement, Mrs. Gale: and yet at the same time the adventure must be a safe one, in order that there may be no chance of exposure. Don't think of the daughter of tradespeople, for instance: I can't bear the manners of the shop—and moreover, the parents of such a girl would prove so mercenary in hushing up the affair that their demands upon my purse would be incessant. For the same reason don't fix upon the daughter of poor gentlefolks: but in order that the novelty may be altogether exciting and *piquant*, let the object of our enterprise be some fair scion of the Aristocracy. There, now—I have given you a difficult task to accomplish! I want you, in a word, to find out a virtuous young lady, of noble family and exquisite beauty, whose purity is beyond all doubt—whose reputation is unblemished as the falling snow—and who will therefore require an immense deal of trouble to overcome. Have I explained myself sufficiently? and will you undertake this enterprise?"

"I not only understand your Royal Highness, but I accept the commission," answered Mrs. Gale. "At the same time the task is indeed a difficult one; and there is a special stipulation I must make."

"Name it," said the Prince.

"That if need be," rejoined the vile woman, "I may associate with me in this proceeding a certain lady of quality with whom I am well acquainted, and who stands sufficiently high for her real character to be above suspicion. I do not think that without the assistance of such a person, I alone could carry out the enterprise successfully."

"Follow your own course," answered the Prince: "but mind that the utmost secrecy is observed. And I tell you what!—it will be more conducive to the excitement and interest of the whole proceeding, if, when you have found out the fair one who is to be the heroine of this adventure, you do not immediately let her know who is in the background. Suppose, for instance, you entice the fair one to some convenient dwelling-place—if a little way in the country so much the better—then you can tell her that she is the object of adoration on the part of an individual of rank and wealth, and you will see how she takes it."

"So that your Royal Highness's name is not to be mentioned in the first instance?" said Mrs. Gale.

"I see that you understand me well," observed the Prince. "Here are a couple of hundred guineas as a retaining fee; and depend upon it, my liberality will be measured in proportion to the pleasure you procure for me from this adventure which we have sketched out and in which I am already anxious to plunge with all the frenzy of a new excitement."

Mrs. Gale received the money with a smiling countenance, and took her leave of the Prince. It was now ten o'clock: but she did not consider the hour too late to take the first step in the business which had been entrusted to her. She accordingly proceeded at once to North Audley Street, and called at the mansion of Lady Lechmere. This lady, whose name the reader will recollect in connexion with the Countess of Curzon, was at home and disengaged: it was not her night for receiving company, nor was she elsewhere at any fashionable *reunion* of her friends. Mrs. Gale,—who was supposed by the domestics to be some benevolent gentlewoman through whose agency Lady Lechmere occasionally dispensed her charities,—was at once admitted into the room where the mistress of the mansion was seated at the time.

Lady Lechmere was, as we have stated in an earlier chapter, a widow on the shady side of forty. She had been a beauty in her younger days; and though inveterately profligate, had nevertheless contrived to preserve her reputation; and she still indulged in secret gallantries, but in a very guarded manner and through the agency of Mrs. Gale. She therefore received the infamous woman with a familiar friendliness; and bidding her sit down, inquired the object of her visit at such an hour. Thereupon Mrs. Gale described everything that had just taken place between herself and the Prince; and Lady Lechmere listened with deep attention to the narrative.

"But now," said her ladyship, when it was concluded, "in what manner do you expect me to help you?—for you cannot suppose that I will run any risk in aiding you to become the pander to the royal pleasures. No reward that he could give me would compensate for the loss of position which would inevitably follow exposure. Being rich, I do not want money; and having already rank and title, there is nothing of that sort that his Royal Highness can bestow upon me."

"But if there be no risk of exposure," said Mrs. Gale, "will not your ladyship embark in the enterprise, merely to oblige the Prince? Consider—though possessed of ample means as you are, and highly placed in society, yet still the special favour of him who is already as good as the Sovereign and will some day be King of England, is not to be despised."

"Granted!" said Lady Lechmere. "But still I am not disposed to run any great risk for the sake of obtaining such favour. You however said just now that there was no peril of this kind to be apprehended. I do not see how you can guard against it."

"What I meant was that, suppose we find out such a young creature as the Prince desires,—when once she has succumbed to his advances, will not she herself either be too proud of her new position, or on the other hand too anxious to avoid the exposure of her shame, to publish to all the world the wiles and treacherous manœuvres adopted to throw her into the arms of the Prince?"

"Your argument certainly looks feasible enough," said Lady Lechmere, now evidently wavering; "and if I were positively assured that there could be no risk, I should not mind lending myself to the service of his Royal Highness."

"Now your ladyship speaks wisely," observed Mrs. Gale: then after a moment's pause, she added, as she surveyed Lady Lechmere with a flattering look, "And who knows what may be the result? You are still very handsome, and of the age too of many ladies who have won and enjoyed the royal favour——Ah! my dear madam, suppose the Prince took a fancy to *you?*"

"He might, it is true," muttered Lady Lechmore to herself: "more improbable things in this world have happened. Well, I will think more of it. Call again in a few days——"

"My dear lady, there is no time to wait," interrupted Mrs. Gale. "Those who intend to serve a Prince well, must serve him quickly. At all events, you can no doubt give me immediate advice as to the first step to be taken in this enterprise; and in so doing, you will not endanger yourself. Then, as to whether you will afterwards proceed any further in the business, is a subject that can stand over for your mature deliberation."

"In what respect, Mrs. Gale, do you need my succour at the moment?"

"In pointing me out some fair creature amongst your acquaintances whom we may regard as the heroine of this grand drama about to be played."

"Let me see,—what did you tell me?" said Lady Lechmere, in a musing tone: "a young lady of noble family, spotless purity, stainless reputation, exquisite beauty, and who is by no means likely to jump at the Prince's overtures, but full of coyness and shyness——in short, a citadel that is to be attacked and must be able to resist a siege ere its surrender. Is not this what you require?"

"Exactly so," returned Mrs. Gale.

"Then let me tell you that it is by no means easy to place one's finger upon a being combining all these qualities. If beauty alone were required, the circle of my acquaintance would no doubt furnish a whole bevy of such fair candidates for the royal favour. But, bless you! they would each and all surrender at the very first overture made by the Prince. Perhaps though," added Lady Lechmere, "we might let one of these fair creatures into the secret and teach her to simulate coyness and shyness——"

"No—that will not do," hastily interrupted Mrs. Gale. "The Prince is as deep as a well and as cunning as a fox; and not for a minute would he be deceived by the substitution of artificial prudery for natural modesty. Besides, as he himself assured me, he is an excellent judge of physiognomy; and I have no doubt he is so well experienced in the female character that at the very first glance he can tell whether the blush that arises on beauty's cheek springs from an innate sense of artless delicacy, or from any less refined sentiment. In a word, Lady Lechmere, it must be a young lady of genuine qualities whom we are to introduce to the Prince."

"Ah, I have it!" suddenly ejaculated Lady Lechmere. "I know where there is exactly the exquisite creature who will suit the present purpose. My acquaintance with her is very slight indeed: I have been but once to the mansion of the noble relatives with whom she resides:—but from the little I saw upon that occasion of the young lady to whom I allude, and from all I have heard of her, she is the very being to answer the description you have given. Indeed, I question whether the Prince would ever triumph over her at all, unless by downright violence or treachery."

"And I do really think it was something of that sort which his Royal Highness had in view," cried Mrs. Gale; "although he of course would not speak out too plainly upon the point. But who is this phœnix of perfection that you are speaking of?"

"She is engaged to be married and is altogether so beautiful, so amiable, so innocent a creature," said Lady Lechmere, musing aloud, "that I should have some compunction in being the instrument of doing her a wrong."

"Oh, my dear lady! this is being *too* punctilious," ejaculated Mrs. Gale. "Come now, if you will succour me in the present enterprize, I will promise to introduce you to a young gentleman who is handsome as Apollo, as discreet as a Minister of State, and who will be delighted to engage in a tender intrigue with your ladyship."

Mrs. Gale then proceeded to delineate the most exciting picture of a perfect Adonis of masculine beauty, so that she speedily worked up Lady Lechmere's passions to an almost frenzied degree. We must however observe that the wily woman was entirely drawing upon her own imagination for this handsome youth whom she was so generously promising as a paramour for the licentious demirep. But Lady Lechmere put implicit faith in all that the procuress was saying; and though of an age when she ought to have been able to control the fury of her passions, yet did her looks betray the ravenous frenzy of the desires that were blazing up within her.

"Come to me to-morrow morning, soon after breakfast," she said to Mrs. Gale, "and we will talk more upon the subject. I must think over it for at least this night. Besides, amongst the circle of my acquaintance, it is quite possible that I may think of some other fair creature who will better answer your purposes, and whom I should have less remorse in delivering over to the arms of the Prince. Come then, to-morrow, I rep at—as early as you like—and we will decide upon what is to be done."

Mrs. Gale was well pleased with this arrangement, and took her departure, congratulating herself that the ground was already cleared for the campaign which she had to conduct.

CHAPTER CCXI.

THE DARK HOUR.

In one of the most beautiful parts of Buckinghamshire, stood Hallingham Hall, the country-seat of

Lord Florimel. It was situated in a vale, with a limpid river meandering through the spacious grounds; and the slopes of the surrounding eminences presented a beautiful variety of landscape scenes.

Lord and Lady Florimel, together with their beautiful niece Florence Eaton, had been staying for about a fortnight at Hallingham Hall; and at the expiration of this period they were joined by Sir Valentine Malvern, who was to pass a short time there previous to the nuptial ceremony that would make the lovely Florence his bride.

The young lady was naturally rejoiced to meet her intended husband again—for even the fortnight's separation had appeared quite an age: while, on his part, Sir Valentine was well pleased to observe that the fresh air of the country had already conduced to the restoration of the colour to the cheeks of Florence. For latterly, ere removing to Hallingham Hall, she had grown pale and melancholy, her looks denoting that a deep despondency was taking possession of her mind. It had been thought the change of air would prove beneficial alike to her health and spirits; and this hope on the part of the fond relatives and anxious lover, seemed already to be in the course of complete fulfilment.

"My dearest Florence," said Valentine Malvern, one evening, when a few days after his arrival he and his intended were rambling together on the bank of the river which wound its way amidst the fields, like a long coiling snake of pellucid glass,—"my dearest Florence, you know not how rejoiced I am to see you recovering your health and spirits. Ah! my dear girl, I have passed many an unhappy hour during the last two months on your account!"

"I know that such has been the case, Valentine," she replied, gazing with mournful tenderness up into his countenance as she clung to his arm: "and I can assure you that it has increased my sorrow when I have seen you thus anxious concerning me. Believe me, I have struggled to the utmost of my power to conceal the despondency that was gradually weighing me down: but, Oh! it was so difficult to assume gaiety when the heart was heavy as if sinking with a weariness of life."

"But tell me, dear Florence—give me the assurance from your own lips—that you are happier *now?*"—and Malvern gazed upon her with the most ardent devotion, the most affectionate interest, and the most tender love, depicted in every lineament of his handsome features.

"I feel happier now that you are with me," answered Florence: and then it seemed to her lover as if she struggled with a great effort to subdue the sigh which nevertheless rose to her lips.

"Yes—but was I not also with you when in London?" he asked, in a mildly mournful voice: "and then were you not yielding to that despondency which caused your fond relatives and myself such cruel anxiety on your account?"

"Valentine—dear Valentine," she answered, "let us change the conversation."

"Heavens, you are weeping, Florence! you are weeping!" he exclaimed, as the pearly drops trickling down her cheeks, gleamed in the rays of the descending sun. "Oh! what means this grief—this sorrow?"

"Do not ask me, dear Valentine," she said, pressing the arm to which her delicate hand clung: and her voice was now nearly suffocated with sobs. "You know full well all that must be passing in my mind——"

"Oh, that fatal day!" ejaculated Malvern bitterly: "that fatal day when your aunt took you to St. James's Palace!"

"And yet," murmured Florence, "it was the day which made us acquainted."

"True! and therefore I bless that day for one thing," cried Malvern. "In that respect it is the brightest day in my whole existence. But for other reasons it is a day to be regretted. Florence, dear Florence, you are still weeping? Oh! tranquillize yourself—compose your feelings—put away these sorrowful memories from your mind—do, sweet girl, I implore you—I conjure you——not merely for my sake, but also for your own!"—and catching her in his arms, he strained the beauteous creature to his breast.

"Valentine," she murmured, as they resumed their walk together along the bank of the river, "you know that I love you with an affection as fond, as devoted, and as sincere as ever female heart could cherish: but not even the strength of all this love of mine can pour into my soul a flood of happiness potent enough to sweep away those desponding thoughts which despite of myself overshadow me at times and make me feel as if some evil were impending. Alas, Valentine! it was the hand of heaven itself which so combined a variety of circumstances as to lead me on to the knowledge of the mystery of my birth—that mystery which my kind relatives had so long and so sedulously endeavoured to keep shrouded from my view! And Oh! when I think of my poor mother's wrongs——for wrongs she must have suffered—wrongs she must have endured—though I am but so partially acquainted with the tale as not to understand it all thoroughly——yet, when I think of that poor dead mother's wrongs, it is enough to drive me mad!"—and the young maiden, stopping suddenly short and disengaging herself from her lover's arm, covered her face with her hands—and he beheld the tears trickling between her gloved fingers.

"O Florence—dearest, dearest Florence—yield not thus to the influence of these bitter thoughts!" exclaimed Valentine, himself almost frenzied with grief. "It is all my fault!—it was I who made you a rash promise to help in solving the mystery which bewildered and afflicted you!—it was I who went to the palace and sought an interview with the Prince——"

"The Prince—my father!" said Florence, suddenly interrupting him: and as she removed her hands at the same time from her countenance, he saw that it was deadly pale, and wore the expression of an anguish which, even had he not loved her so tenderly as he did, would still have been painful enough for him to behold on the countenance of one so beautiful, so young, so innocent!

"Florence, why speak you thus? why look you thus?" he asked, gazing on her with a sort of terror as well as grief. "There is a depth in your tone and there is an agonizing impress on your features which I cannot endure!"

"Listen to me, dear Valentine," she said, again taking his arm and gently resuming her walk by his side on the bank of the river. "I feel that I

must now give utterance to those thoughts which sit so heavy upon my soul. And if not to you, to whom else on earth should I breathe them? Listen, I say—and do not interrupt me. Though so little has been told me relative to the mystery of my birth—and that little so guardedly and so delicately imparted by my beloved relatives—yet can my imagination fill up all the gloomy shades and terrible voids of the picture. Alas, Valentine! that my mother—my dear perished mother—must have been pure, and virtuous, and innocent, and good, I am confident: for is not my aunt Pauline so? and were they not sisters? Alas!—then, she must have been deceived—she must have been betrayed: and who was the deceiver—who was the betrayer? He who holds upon my heart the claim of a father: he whom nature prompts me to love with a filial affection, but whom I cannot love——no, no, I cannot even think of him with respect—feeling confident, as I do, that he betrayed and deceived my too trusting, too loving mother! For a time—until I knew in what light the Prince stood with regard to me—I experienced a yearning towards him: from the moment of that interview at St. James's Palace, my sympathy was enlisted in his behalf, in a manner that often stirred my thoughts with an indescribable pathos and made me weep. But still all *that* was a feeling so very different from the one which I experience for you! Then, when the mystery of that yearning was cleared up, and I discovered that it was nature's voice appealing from the depths of my soul towards the author of my being,—Oh! what would I not have given to be enabled to love, revere, and venerate him as a daughter should love, revere, and venerate a father? But no, no—this happiness was not to be allowed me: for at the same time that I learnt in what light he stood towards me, did I become aware of my poor mother's unhappy love. Ah! her early death—a death no doubt caused by a broken heart—tells but too plainly the terrible tale of ruined hopes—blighted affections! And now you understand, Valentine, how hard it is—nay, more, how shocking it is—to be compelled to think of my own father as the cause of my poor mother's premature death. There have been times when, gazing up at the canvass on which the countenance of that dear mother is preserved, I have felt my heart throb almost to bursting, and I have been so choked with a convulsing anguish that it has seemed as if the hand of death were upon me, and that I was about to join my perished parent in the grave!"

Florence ceased—not because she had given utterance to all she had to say, but because her voice was now lost in a fresh outburst of anguish. Again did her lover snatch her to his breast—imprint upon her cheeks, her lips, and her brow the fondest caresses—and say everything he could to soothe, solace, and cheer her. By her looks he saw that she was deeply sensible of the sincerity of his love and the tenderness of his sympathy: but the dark hour was upon her, and she was a prey to a grief which admitted not of speedy consolation.

"Valentine," she continued, in a voice plaintively low and mournfully sweet, "I cannot help this tide of reflections rushing in upon my brain with an almost overwhelming effect. You will pardon me—you will forgive me, if I thus distress you: but these thoughts which fill me with grief are stronger than myself. For the first fortnight that I was at Hallingham, I experienced a kind of relief in being afar from the same city which contains him whom I am bound in the secrecy of my heart to regard as my father—but whom, alas! I cannot love nor revere as such. Within the last two or three days, however, the gloominess of my thoughts has been slowly and steadily coming back. I have struggled against that growing despondency—I have battled with it as courageously, as resolutely, and as arduously as I could: yes—battled with it more for your sake than my own, because I would not afflict you! But this evening the cloud has settled again upon my soul with a weight and with a darkness which I could neither conceal nor shake off. Alas, alas! Valentine," she added, suddenly bursting forth into a passionate flood of weeping, "I am afraid that you will not consult your own happiness by espousing me!"

"Heavens, Florence—speak not thus!" wildly exclaimed Malvern: "there is something dreadful in your words!"

"Oh! do they sound like prophecy?" she asked in a frenzied manner. "Yes, yes—they do: for they are dictated by a presentiment!"

"Florence, you distress me more than language can describe!" said Malvern, a deep solemnity suddenly filling his looks, his voice, and his manner. "During the fortnight I was separated from you—being compelled to remain in London, as you are aware, to transact particular business in respect to my late father's affairs—my soul was gladdened by the cheering accounts which I received concerning you from Lord Florimel. I came down hither a few days ago joyful in the thought that I should behold you restored to health and spirits. And this hope seemed to be confirmed. Several days have passed—I have watched you, Oh! you know not with how intense and absorbing an interest; and each night, on retiring to my chamber, have I knelt down to return thanks to heaven for this change which I believed to have been consummated in the condition of your health and the tone of your mind. This evening, when we came forth for our usual walk, I felt my heart so exultant—my joy so full of a soaring gratitude towards heaven—that I could no longer prevent my lips from giving utterance to the words of congratulation towards yourself. Alas, alas!" continued Valentine, in deep despondency, "I now find that the cloud has returned to your soul, and that your thoughts are full of gloominess and pain. But believe me, Florence," he added in a fervid manner, "that all the endeavours of my life shall be directed to the healing of this wounded soul of thine—my every study shall be to win you away from grief and foreboding, and to conjure up the smiles again to your sweet angelic countenance!"

"Your kindness touches me to the quick," faltered the pale but beauteous girl: "but alas! I fear so deeply lest this morbid state of mind on my part—for such I know and feel it is—should cause you incessant affliction: whereas the object of marriage should be the promotion of the happiness of both."

"Florence, dear Florence, I beseech you not to talk thus!" said Malvern, gently encircling her slender waist with his arm. "You are dearer to

me than aught that the world possesses—and so must you ever remain. When I gaze on you and behold the looks of innocence beaming upon the lineaments of beauty—when I contemplate you as a being of an etherealized order—it cuts me to the very soul to think that sorrow should have been able to fasten its vulture-talons upon such a heart as yours. But, Oh! my beloved Florence—my angel—my darling—God is just, God is merciful—and there is not a bane in this world without its antidote—there is not a wound that can be inflicted for which no anodyne can be found! And you, my adored one, when surrounded by all the tender ministrations of the most enthusiastic love—when enshrined as the idol of my worship and my devotion,—you, I say, sweet Florence, shall find that in such a love as this there is a soothing power even for the griefs that may have eaten most deeply into your soul!"

Of her own accord the gentle maiden threw her arms around her lover's neck, and kissed him unasked. Then as she thus clung to him, she drew back her head somewhat and gazed up into his countenance with a look of such fond, such ineffable affection, that it seemed as if the spirit of ethereal love itself were shining through her. At that moment, too, the last beams of the sinking sun shone upon her features; and as the reviving bliss of her heart sent up the roseate hue again to her cheeks, her countenance appeared radiant as that of an angel with the sunlight playing on it. The effect was heightened by the tear-drops which still stood upon her long lashes, and which glittered like diamonds: while the sweet azure orbs themselves reflected the dancing light, and the rich tresses of her golden hair seemed to catch a burnished lustre from the same source—thus adding to the glory of her aspect.

"O beauteous, beauteous Florence, thou art an angel and not a creature of this earth!" cried the

enraptured Malvern, as he strained her with impassioned vehemence to his breast.

His ear caught not the sigh which came up from the depths of the young maiden's soul, as the presentiment struck her that though she was indeed as yet a being of this world, yet it was written in the book of destiny that she should soon be an angel in heaven!

The lovers now resumed their walk along the bank of the river; and if Florence were not happier in her mind, at all events her despondency was less apparent than a few minutes back;—for the excitement of the heart's feelings, aroused by those tender proofs of love on Valentine's part, had recalled the colour to her cheeks and the brightness to her eyes. But, Ah! what means that loud cry which, suddenly ringing through the air, reaches their ears? They stop short; and Florence clings to Sir Valentine Malvern's arm, as if to prevent herself from sinking down beneath the weight of a vague but terrible presentment which falls upon her.

Almost at the same instant a man is seen rushing towards them along the bank, having apparently emerged from a copse, or grove, which stretched down to the margin of the stream at a little distance.

"Help, for God's sake—help!" cries this individual, who seems to be a labouring man. "Lord Florimel is drowning! Help, help!"

At those terrible words a wild shriek burst from the lips of Florence Eaton; and her senses immediately abandoning her, she would have fallen had not Valentine's arm sustained her.

"Help, help! quick, quick!" cried the individual who had given the alarm. "Come—or it will be too late!"

Not another instant did Valentine hesitate how to act: but depositing the inanimate form of Florence upon the grass, which a sultry day had left perfectly free from dampness, he bounded in the track of the strange man, who guided him fleetly towards the copse just alluded to. But scarcely had the young Baronet entered the grove, when he was seized upon by three other men wearing black masks over their countenances; and being altogether unprepared for such an attack, he was overpowered in an instant. Indeed, quick as thought, strong cords were fastened to his hands and feet: he was then bound to a tree; and the three men, accompanied by the individual who had enticed him thither, rushed away in the direction where he had left Florence.

Notwithstanding the suddenness with which this outrage was accomplished, Valentine had demanded of the men what their object was—whom he had offended—and why he was thus treated? For he was at once convinced that they were not robbers, inasmuch as they exhibited no unnecessary violence in thus securing him; nor did they offer to plunder his person. But he could obtain no answer to the questions thus put; and the work being done effectually, though hurriedly, the men sped away, as already stated—leaving the young Baronet bound fast to the tree in the deep shade of the grove.

Desperate was the struggle he made to release himself; for the cruellest apprehensions now seized upon his mind in respect to Florence. But his efforts to escape from the bonds which secured him, were altogether unavailing. Then he suddenly relinquished the attempt, and strained his eyes to penetrate through the shade of the grove and the deepening gloom of evening, so as to follow the men with his looks and watch their proceedings. But no—he could not, from the spot where he was thus bound, command a view of that place where he had left Florence lying upon the grass: and well nigh driven to frenzy, he shouted for help as loudly as he could. The echoes answered him—but no other voice responded. The darkness deepened—the passing minutes grew into an hour—and still was the unhappy young gentleman held fast in the captivity of his bonds. Again and again did he struggle with desperation to extricate himself; but no—the cords were stout—they had been tied with skilful hands, though the work was done rapidly—and it was a tree strong as a marble column to which the lover of Florence Eaton was thus held fast. Two—three—four hours passed; and under the influence of terrible apprehensions, agonizing feelings, cruel uncertainties, and wildering conjectures—combined with the exhaustion produced by incessant but vainly renewed attempts to free himself from his bonds—Sir Valentine Malvern felt his physical and mental energies alike giving way.

Presently—some time past midnight—just as he was sinking down into that kind of langour which seemed to be the precursor of approaching death, he heard voices at a distance, and beheld the gleam of lights moving about to and fro along the bank of the river. Collecting all his energies, he cried out for help again: but his voice was so feeble that it was some time ere he could make himself heard. At length he succeeded: and then the lights all began advancing rapidly towards the grove, so that in a few moments he could perceive that they were torches which several men were carrying in their hands. Almost immediately afterwards Lord Florimel, attended by all the male domestics of his mansion—for these were the bearers of the torches—entered the grove; and their amazement may be better conceived than described when they discovered Sir Valentine Malvern in that condition.

In the hurried manner of acute suspense he inquired concerning Florence; and then all his uncertainty was cleared up—all his terrible misgiving was confirmed—on hearing from Lord Florimel's lips that the young lady had not been seen since she went forth to walk before sunset with Sir Valentine. Indeed, it appeared that the prolonged and unaccountable absence of the two lovers had naturally filled the inmates of the Hall with alarm; and as the hours passed away and they returned not, Lord Florimel had come forth with all his male dependants to examine the banks of the river, and ascertain if any traces of accident or misadventure might afford a clue to the mystery of this absence.

Being speedily emancipated from his bonds,—and his strength somewhat recruited by a draught of brandy, which one of the men (a gamekeeper) happened to have in a flask about his person,—Sir Valentine related all that had occurred; and there could consequently be no longer any doubt as to the fact that some diabolical treachery had been played. In a word, it

was clear enough that Florence had been carried off. The false alarm which had represented Lord Florimel to be drowning, was of course a heartless stratagem to separate Sir Valentine from Florence; and the reader has seen how well the trick succeeded.

But who could be the perpetrator of the outrage? This seemed to defy all conjecture. There was however no time to indulge in speculations and hypotheses upon the point: but Lord Florimel ordered his dependants to separate in all directions, and make inquiries amongst the peasants and country-people as to whether strangers had been seen, or a post-chaise or other vehicle observed, under any circumstances that might afford a clue to the solution of the mystery. In short, everything was done which could be possibly thought of at the time, to get upon the track of the authors of this most unaccountable outrage.

CHAPTER CCXII.

THE ABDUCTION.

We left Florence Eaton lying in a state of unconsciousness upon the bank of the river. When she came to herself again, she was inside a vehicle along with two females. The carriage was tearing along at a tremendous rate; and in the dim uncertain light which now prevailed, the amazed and affrighted girl could distinguish no familiar features by the roadside so as to make her aware of the route which the equipage was pursuing; and it was only with indistinctness that she could perceive the countenances of the two females in whose company she thus found herself.

At first it struck her that she must be in a dream; and closing her eyes, she pressed her hand to her brow to concentrate her reflections. But as all that had taken place on the bank of the river came rapidly back to her mind, and she remembered the alarming occurrence which had made her swoon in her lover's arms,—she gave vent to a sudden cry of anguish; and forcibly catching the sleeve of the female who was seated next to her, she exclaimed in a quick hysterical tone, "My uncle—Lord Florimel—what has happened? Speak, speak!"

"Your uncle, my dear child," answered the female to whom she had addressed herself, and who by her voice, manner, and deportment Florence soon perceived to be a high-bred person—"your uncle, my dear child, is safe!"

"Heaven be thanked!" cried Florence, a tremendous weight suddenly taken from her mind. "But whither am I going? who are you? what means this rapid travelling? Oh, keep me not in suspense! Something terrible must have occurred—for all this can scarcely mean harm to myself!"

"Fear nothing, and give way to no apprehensions," replied the lady who was seated next to Florence. "Everything that is being done is for your ultimate good. You are too much excited now for me to enter into any particulars: besides which, it is impossible to converse calmly and tranquilly while travelling at this rapid rate. In about an hour we shall be at our journey's end; and you may rely, Miss Eaton, upon the kindest treatment and the most delicate attentions."

"But who are you?" inquired Florence, both frightened and bewildered. "Surely if you are friendly disposed towards me, you will not hesitate, even for a single instant, to say wherefore I am in your company? In short, what is the meaning of all this proceeding, so incomprehensible to me?"

"Know me as Mrs. Waldegrave," said the lady; "and this person," she added, in allusion to the other female, who was seated opposite, "is my housekeeper, Mrs. Spencer. She is a kind-hearted and excellent woman, and will pay you all possible attention."

"You are both strange to me—I never even heard of you before!" cried Florence, her misgivings increasing to the most poignant degree of anguish. "Why are you taking me away?—is it with the consent of my uncle and aunt?—where is Sir Valentine Malvera? Oh! speak, I conjure you!—keep me not in suspense! Has any harm befallen *him?*"

"No—nothing of the kind," responded Mrs. Waldegrave. "You have naught, my dear child, to make you unhappy—much less fill you with alarm."

"Then in one word," said Florence, all her courage and all her presence of mind appearing to concentrate themselves for a great effort in the present emergency of suspicion and doubt,—"in one word, tell me what means this proceeding, or I will shriek forth from the carriage-window for help."

"Miss Eaton, I cannot and will not explain myself at present," answered the lady who called herself Mrs. Waldegrave; and she spoke in a firm, decisive, and almost peremptory voice. "As for your threat of crying for help from the window, it were useless: the carriage is mine—the servants are mine—and you may rest assured that whatever their instructions are, they will obey them."

Florence Eaton said not another word, but sank back into the corner of the vehicle with a terrible sensation of wretchedness in her bosom. That she was the victim of some treachery was but too evident; but of what nature could this treachery be? Her soul was too guileless, her thoughts too pure, her acquaintance with the ways of the world too limited, to enable her to form the natural conjecture which a female of larger experience would at once have done: namely, that it was for the most dishonourable of purposes she had thus been made the victim of a forceable abduction. Three or four times during the hour which elapsed after she had regained her consciousness, did she beseech Mrs. Waldegrave to relieve her mind from suspense: but perceiving that it was in vain to question this lady, the unhappy girl gave way to her grief in floods of tears and bitter lamentations.

Presently the carriage stopped, while a servant got down from the box to open a gate leading into a large park; and then the equipage, turning into this enclosure, pursued its way up a wide gravel road to a spacious and handsome-looking mansion, at the principal entrance of which it stopped. The front door immediately opened—a couple of servants in rich liveries came forth—and Mrs. Waldegrave hastily whispered in Florence Eaton's ear, "For your own sake make no appeal to my domestics: for they cannot—they dare not—disobey my orders, whatever those orders may be; and

you would only expose yourself to a mortifying humiliation by appealing to them."

Florence Eaton felt so truly miserable that she had now neither spirits nor courage for anything: but descending mechanically from the carriage, she suffered herself to be conducted by Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer into the mansion. Lights were burning in the hall, which was spacious and lofty, with marble columns and splendid statues. Thence they ascended a wide and equally magnificent staircase: but Florence observed little of the specimens of sculpture or the porcelain vases which embellished the ascent. She was led on into a sumptuously furnished sitting-room, where a table was spread with refreshments, and Mrs. Waldegrave now pressed her to sit down and partake of the repast. The invitation seemed all in a moment to make the young lady sensible of the circumstances of her position: that is to say, she suddenly woke up from the confusion of her ideas, and flinging a quick glance around, exclaimed, "This is no place with which I am familiar! everything is strange, as the countenances which meet my eyes! Tell me then, once for all—where am I, and who are you?"

"My name I have already told you," said Mrs. Waldegrave: "I may now add that this is my house, where you will be a most welcome guest."

"Or a prisoner—a captive!" cried Florence bitterly: then arming herself with all a young virgin's dignity, she said, "But no—it is scarcely possible that you can really mean outrage against me! You are yourself evidently a lady of wealth, and position, and respectability, and you can have no object in doing me harm. *You* also," added Florence, turning towards Mrs. Spencer, "are of an appearance far from calculated to inspire terror or foreboding. There is even something kind and benevolent in your looks. Then why am I here?"

As she asked herself this question,—for it was put in a musing manner to herself, though spoken aloud,—a pallor of a ghastly aspect suddenly overspread her countenance; and she staggered back as if the idea which suddenly entered her head had struck her with the violence of a blow. Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer sprang forward to catch her in their arms: for they thought she was on the point of falling backward;—but with an abrupt start and a wild cry, she shrieked forth, "No, no—keep off—do not come near me! You wish to put the strait-waistcoat on me—you think me mad! O heavens! you think me mad!" repeated the wretched girl: and flinging herself upon a sofa, she burst into a flood of tears, wringher hands bitterly.

Mrs. Waldegrave and Mrs. Spencer exchanged quick looks of amazement, as they all in a moment comprehended the nature of the idea which had thus suddenly taken possession of Florence Eaton.

"Oh! yes, yes—now I understand it all!" again shrieked forth the poor girl, in the wildest paroxysms of anguish. "I have read in books how people are thus spirited away by strangers, and at night-time—thrust into carriages—and borne off to mad-houses. But I am not mad! No, no—believe me, dear lady," she continued, throwing herself upon her knees at the feet of Mrs. Waldegrave, "I am not mad! Good heavens! is it possible that my uncle and my aunt, who have cherished me so tenderly—or that Valentine, who loves me so fondly—could have consigned me to the horrors of a mad-house? It is true that I have had strange thoughts and perhaps said strange things at times: but still I am not mad—no, not mad!"

"Rise, rise, dear child," said Mrs. Waldegrave, in a soothing and conciliatory manner. "Take my advice—retire to rest—endeavour to sleep soundly—and to-morrow we will have some serious conversation together. Do not for a moment fancy that any harm will befall you."

"Well, I must trust in your kindness then," said poor Florence, in a tone so deeply mournful and with a look so full of utter despair, that any but the flintiest heart would have been moved by that spectacle of woe on the part of one so youthful, so innocent, so lovely!

She rose from her knees, slowly and painfully, and with a fixed look in which there was nothing wild, but all blank hopelessness: while Mrs. Spencer intimated her readiness to conduct the young lady to a bed-chamber. Florence followed her mechanically, and was escorted up-stairs to a room furnished in the most elegant manner. Mrs. Spencer asked if Miss Eaton would prefer sleeping alone, or whether she would like to have a lady's-maid as her companion?—in reply to which Florence uttered the single word, "Alone!" and then Mrs. Spencer, bidding her good-night, issued from the chamber.

The young damsel sat herself down near the elegant toilet-table; but instead of making any preparations for retiring to rest, she fell into a deep reverie. As the reader has already seen, she fancied she had discovered the clue to all these proceedings which had at first filled her with so much uncertainty and alarm;—and she began to revolve in her mind all that she had ever said or done within the last few months that could possibly have led her relations to imagine that her mind was unhinged. Poor girl! she soon began attaching importance to many, many comparatively trivial words and actions on her part; and as she pondered upon those intervals when the dark cloud had rested upon her soul, she could not help saying to herself, "Alas! perhaps it is indeed too true!—and when I thought of my poor dead mother's wrongs, I might have looked and said such strange things that those about me fancied me mad!"

She put her hand to her brow, and pressed it hard to her throbbing temples. Then, resting her elbow upon the toilet-table, she sat perfectly motionless for several minutes, asking herself whether in truth her mind was unsettled, or whether she was the victim of a fearful misconception on the part of her relatives? Alas! this morbid state of feeling on her part was but too well calculated to unsettle her mind in reality, and make reason totter upon its throne!

All of a sudden she burst into a violent fit of weeping; and wringing her hands bitterly, exclaimed aloud, "O Valentine, Valentine! you also thought me mad—and you must likewise have given your assent to my being brought hither!"

At length, exhausted with the wearing and tearing excitement of her feelings, she laid aside her apparel—retired to rest—and speedily sank into a profound slumber.

When she awoke in the morning and reflected on all that had taken place on the previous night, she was more than ever convinced that the whole proceeding was dictated by the motives her imagination had suggested. She feared not ill-treatment in her present habitation, nor at the hands of those by whom she was surrounded: but she longed—Oh! she deeply longed to go back to her relations whom she loved so well, and again to behold him who possessed the tenderest affections of her heart. But how was this happy consummation to be brought about? It naturally occurred to her that she could only be restored to her home and to her friends when her mind should no longer exhibit any of those morbid feelings which (as she fondly fancied) had led to her present position. She therefore resolved to exercise a rigid and stern control not only over all her words, but over all her thoughts,—to study alike the discipline of her mind and the forms of her language,—in a word, to do her best to convince those about her, in as short a time as possible, that she was thoroughly cured. Thus did this poor girl reason herself into the belief that her brain was actually touched by insanity, and that it was necessary for her to exert all her moral energies with a view to the re-establishment of her complete mental health.

Having been led by the very artlessness of her nature to these conclusions,—for she was too guileless to suspect for a single instant that it was from dishonourable motives she had been snatched away from home and placed where she was,—she did not of course entertain the slightest resentment against her uncle and aunt, nor against Valentine Malvern, for having (as she supposed) consigned her to a mad house. She believed that they had only done what was absolutely necessary, and with the kindest intention towards herself. She even, therefore, more lovingly and tenderly than ever cherished their images; and, if possible, more devoutly prayed that heaven would shower down the choicest blessings upon their heads.

Presently a neatly-dressed young female, of interesting appearance, entered the chamber, announcing herself as the lady's-maid specially appointed to wait upon Miss Eaton. Florence received her with that amiable kindness which she was ever wont to display towards her inferiors; and the maid could not help thinking to herself that the young lady already seemed wonderfully resigned to all that had happened to her. By the time the process of the toilet was finished, Mrs. Waldegrave made her appearance; and embracing Florence, she expressed her delight to find her so tranquillized in feeling and so comparatively well in looks. Florence gave a smiling answer, and even expressed herself grateful for the attentions with which she found herself surrounded. Mrs. Waldegrave then led her down to the breakfast parlour; and though the young damsel ate but little, she nevertheless seemed in tolerably good spirits, and treated Mrs. Waldegrave with a sort of affectionate respect.

We must here pause to give some brief description of the mansion at which the present scenes are occurring. It was one of those old-fashioned country-seats which are principally to be met with in the agricultural districts, and which at the time of their erection were intended in all respects to suit the purposes and the conveniences of those country 'squires who farmed their own estates and lived from one year's end to another amongst their tenants without dreaming of "London seasons" or visits to fashionable watering-places. The mansion of which we are speaking, was one of the kind alluded to. It was spacious, and possessed numerous outhouses,—so that while in front it had all the appearance of a handsome country-house, in the rear it looked like an immense farm-homestead. The hall, the staircase, and some of the sitting-apartments had been completely modernized, by the aid of marble pillars, sculptured cornices, beautiful statues, carpets upon the oaken floors, and such other arrangements as suited the fashionable tastes of the recent and present possessor of the mansion. It was chiefly in the upper portion of the spacious building that its antiquated architecture and arrangements had been left untouched by the innovation of modern decorators, builders, carpenters, and upholsterers. The highest storey consisted of a long passage, reaching from one end of the building to the other, and having on each side an array of doors numbered like those of an inn. Overhead, and just beneath the roof, was an immense loft, stretching likewise from one extremity of the building to the other; and this place in former times had served as a store-room for the purposes of the thrifty housewife. But the shelves, racks, and frames, where autumn-fruits in those past times were wont to be kept, and where all kinds of garden-stuff, sweet herbs, and so forth, had been spread out with a careful hand for winter's use,—were all empty now; and the immense loft no longer served for any purpose. However, the clumsy wooden crane, which in former times had been used to hoist up huge hampers of fruit, baskets of vegetables, sacks of potatoes, and all the products of the kitchen-garden that were wont to be stored, as above stated, in the immense loft,—that huge crane, we say, was still there: but the door from which it had to be thrust forth when its services were required, and which, as the reader may understand, opened as it were upon an abyss, had remained shut up many long, long years.

Having thus glanced at the appearance of the mansion where the present scenes are passing, we shall now resume the thread of our narrative.

CHAPTER CCXIII.

THE FAIR CAPTIVE.

A WEEK had passed since the forcible abduction of Florence Eaton, and during this interval the morbid condition of the young damsel's mind had experienced the pernicious influences of her captivity, as well as of the belief which she had formed in respect to its motive. When alone, she often and often carried her thoughts back to those days when she was blithe and happy—when nothing weighed upon her soul, and she knew not the name of care! This train of reflection naturally led her to date the altered state of her feelings from that fatal hour when she first beheld the Prince Regent at St. James's Palace; and she could not help often and often saying to herself, "Had I never known the Prince—my father—I

should be gay and happy now, as previously I was wont to be!"

The result of these meditations was a strengthening of that feeling of pain and anguish which, ever since the discovery of her parentage, she had experienced when thinking of her father. We have heard her in sorrow and in grief make her unsophisticated plaint to Valentine Malvern, to the effect that she could not love, revere, and venerate the name of her father as a daughter should: but now, during this week of her captivity, she had been insensibly but irresistibly led on to regard that father's image not merely with pain, but with absolute aversion. She struggled against this sentiment so repugnant to her delicate appreciations of gentleness, kindness, and propriety: but it gained upon her—it grew stronger than herself—and she could not throw off its influence. Let us follow her for a little space, when thus carried on by the strong current of her reflections; and the reader will gain therefrom a deeper insight into the mysterious changes that were operating in the soul of Florence Eaton.

"Can I any longer conceal from myself that the spell of an evil destiny is upon me? Why was I suffered, after the lapse of so many years, to penetrate the veil of mystery which had been so religiously kept hanging over my birth? My childhood had passed in blissful ignorance of everything calculated to draw down a cloud upon my soul: my girlhood had passed likewise in the same happy unconsciousness of all that lurked behind the veil; but when entering upon womanhood, the force of destiny suddenly manifested itself, and, as it was decreed that my eyes should be opened so as to scan the past, heaven in its own inscrutable manner combined all the incidents that were to lead to this initiation. Thus the day which first brought me into the presence of my father, likewise threw me in the way of Valentine, through whom it was decreed that the reading of the mystery was to be brought about. For had I not so earnestly besought him to clear it up for me, never would the secret have fallen from the lips of my uncle and my aunt! And then, what did I discover? That the Prince, who at first had enlisted my sympathies, had been the cause long years ago of my poor mother's unhappiness, and shame, and premature death! And I have sought to love this father—but I cannot! No—if I endeavour to look lovingly on his image, that of my poor mother rises up before me in mournfulness, in sorrow—even with reproachful looks, and seems to remind me that I am endeavouring to love her murderer! O heavens! what thought is this which has sent a shudder through my entire being? That my father is a murderer—the murderer of my mother! Alas! when I conjure up that sweet and beauteous countenance whose lineaments are preserved upon the faithful canvass at my uncle's mansion in London, it seems that I must fall down and kneel to that image as if it were an angel's: and then, at the same moment an obtruding shadow darkens my soul—and this shadow is the image of my father! Oh! heaven send that I may never behold the Prince again! For I feel—Oh! I feel that I could not endure to gaze upon him—I could not approach him without feeling a cold tremor pass over me,—I should fly from him—my God! I should fly from him, as if it were a spectre haunting me. His very image fills me with a presentiment of evil! Methinks that my fatal curiosity in seeking to penetrate the mystery of the past, has already begun to draw down a terrible punishment upon my head; and that in the consummation of my unhappy destiny my own father is yet to bear a part!"

But we will not follow the afflicted girl in those reflections to which she constantly found herself yielding, and from which she struggled to escape. Suffice it to say that the condition of her mind day by day grew more morbid, until she at length not merely contemplated the image of her father with pain and aversion, but even with a mortal terror. She would dream that the Prince, in the shape of a hideous spectre, stood by her couch at night, and made threatening gestures with his outstretched arms above her head. Even in the middle of the day, in the broad sunlight, did she behold that image rising up before her, like a dark shade obstructing the beams which the glorious effulgence of noon was pouring in at the windows; and then she would pass her hand rapidly over her eyes, so that the phantom of her imagination would disappear ere the scream that rose to her lips found vent. Horror was thus taking possession of the mind of poor Florence Eaton!

But did not Mrs. Waldegrave perceive all this? No: for in pursuance of the resolve which the young damsel had made on the first morning of her captivity at the mansion—a resolve dictated by her earnest longing to be freed from a place which she fancied to be a mad-house—she maintained an aspect of outward calm, blended even with a certain degree of cheerfulness, that completely veiled the morbid condition of her mind. Heaven knows it was not with any sentiment of low cunning or any feeling of base duplicity, that Florence practised this concealment! No—she was incapable of artifice, as the term is generally understood. Poor girl! she fancied that she had been placed there for the sake of her mental health, and that the more control she exercised over her inward feelings, the sooner she would be restored to her friends—so that it was natural enough for her to imagine that by forcing herself to seem cheerful and gay, she was putting a wholesome restraint upon the morbid action of her thoughts and was ministering to her own cure!

It was on the eighth morning after the young lady's forcible abduction, that Mrs. Waldegrave, when breakfast was over, addressed the fair captive in the following manner:—

"On the night of your arrival, I intimated to you, my dear Miss Eaton, that on the ensuing day we would have some conversation together: but I have purposely postponed all such serious discourse until now, in order that you might have leisure to become completely reconciled to your present abode, and also that you might learn to know me better than the acquaintanceship of a few short hours could possibly have enabled you to do. Now, if you please, we will have this promised but deferred conversation."

"You may easily suppose, Mrs. Waldegrave," said Florence, endeavouring to still the beatings of that heart which was palpitating with suspense, "that I am deeply interested in the observations you have just made, and that I am glad you are about to converse with me upon any topic regard-

ing my welfare—for to such do I conceive you have alluded."

"Listen then, with attention and patience," said Mrs. Waldegrave: and drawing her chair closer to where Florence was seated, she continued thus:—"Young ladies of your age, innocence, and inexperience, often imagine that they themselves are the best judges of their own happiness; and they fondly believe that in order to ensure this happiness, they have only to follow the impulse of a particular sentiment, or yield to the influence of a feeling the greatest charm of which is its novelty. But real happiness, such as the world understands it, is not to be obtained in this manner. Fond relations, more indulgent than wise, will sometimes encourage young ladies to pursue the bent of their inclinations in the course to which I am alluding;—and perhaps they do not err, so long as no prospects of a more brilliant character present themselves to the view. But sometimes when these brilliant prospects do present themselves, they are viewed with mistrust and suspicion, because the prejudices of an extreme refinement of morality are against them: yet when regarded in a purely worldly point of view, the proceeding which they suggest should be looked upon as paramount above all other considerations. I do not know whether you catch my meaning?" observed Mrs. Waldegrave, as she noticed that Florence gazed upon her with a look of deepening perplexity and bewilderment.

"Frankly speaking," replied the young lady, "I cannot at all comprehend the nature of your remarks. If I were to read them in a book, I should consider them as forming a portion of some deep metaphysical essay altogether exceeding the limited range of my intellect."

"I will then become more explicit," said Mrs. Waldegrave; "and instead of speaking of young ladies generally, I will allude to your own case in particular. You have conceived an affection for Sir Valentine Malvern, and you believe that your happiness depends upon the fulfilment of the engagement existing between you. Your relatives have encouraged this attachment on your part; and they have sanctioned the projected union between yourself and Sir Valentine. Now, all this is very well as far as it goes, and belongs to the ordinary routine of life. But suppose that you suddenly found yourself marked out for the fulfilment of another destiny, and that you were called upon to renounce the imagined bliss of these Spring-time hopes and first affections,—suppose that you were made to understand that the career which in your artlessness you had chalked out for yourself, is not the one which you are fated to pursue——"

"Ah! I know—I feel," cried Florence, "how impossible it is to struggle against one's destiny! I have already had proofs of *that!* But surely you, madam, do not pretend to possess the key to the reading of the future as it regards myself? My fate is not in your hands; and heaven cannot have whispered in your ear its intentions respecting me."

"No, my dear Florence," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, somewhat startled by the singularity of the young lady's observations, and not knowing precisely in what sense to read them: "I do not pretend to the gift of prophecy—and believe me that everything which I consider destined to occur to yourself may be foreshadowed without a miracle and will be accomplished by very natural means. But what I wish you to tell me is this:—If it be possible to convince you that the basis upon which you have hitherto hoped to establish your happiness, is not the true one; but that another of a more solid and endurable character, and accompanied with circumstances of greater brilliancy and splendour, can be presented to your view,—what would you say? what answer would you give? in what manner would you treat the proposition?"

Florence gazed upon Mrs. Waldegrave with a slight expression of anxiety in her countenance, as if she had caught a distant idea of the meaning which was buried within this cloud of sophistry and beneath this mass of words: but suddenly becoming profoundly grave, she said in a low and mournful voice, "I do not dare for an instant imagine that you mean me any harm, or that you are capable of giving me bad counsel: but at the same time, your words sink like a presentiment and a foreboding of evil into my heart."

"Perhaps I am not explicit enough yet," said Mrs. Waldegrave, feeling her way with the utmost caution.

"Do you—do you," falteringly asked the young maiden—"do you mean me to understand that I am to renounce the hope of ever becoming the wife of Sir Valentine Malvern?"—and while a deep blush mantled upon her cheeks, the tears suddenly trickled forth from her eyes like an April shower moistening the leaves of the rose.

"I do mean," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, "that if you were to consult your own happiness, you would put away the image of Sir Valentine Malvern from your heart."

"Why—Oh, why?" demanded Florence, with mingled grief, indignation, and alarm. "Is it that I am no longer worthy of his love? is it that you would have me love another? or is it that he himself no longer loves me?"

"You, my dear child," answered Mrs. Waldegrave, with all the blandness of the most motherly air, "are worthy of being loved by the highest, the proudest, and the noblest."

"Then will you dare assert that Valentine has proved himself unworthy of my love?" asked Florence, starting from her seat. "No, no—you would not tell me *that!* I should not believe you—nothing on earth could make me believe you!"

Mrs. Waldegrave now saw that in order to crush as it were the spirit of her intended victim, it was necessary to wound that spirit in its most tender point; and therefore, gazing with solemn earnestness and mournful gravity at the young damsel's countenance, she said, "Florence, prepare yourself to hear something of a most unpleasant character. Valentine Malvern is no longer worthy of you!"

"It is false—it is false!" shrieked forth Florence, in a wild and piercing tone: then clasping her hands together in a paroxysm of acute mental agony, she exclaimed, "I may be mad in some respects—mad with presentiments—mad when haunted by images of evil—mad when gazing upon certain incidents of the past—but never, never will my mind become so clouded as to suffer the belief to creep into it that Valentine is false. Madam, I

begin to suspect you of some deep and sinister motives:—or perhaps you may only say this to try me—to put my fortitude and my reason to the test? But, Oh! if such be your object, it is cruelly carried out—most cruelly, most barbarously!"

"Florence, my dear girl," said Mrs. Waldegrave, rising from her seat and taking both the young lady's hands in her own, "we will say no more concerning this subject upon the present occasion. I do not wish to torture you unnecessarily, nor put you to a test that is too severe. Will you allow me to introduce to you to-morrow a person of my acquaintance, who will himself explain much better than I can possibly do, all that it is necessary for you to know?"

It instantaneously struck Florence that Mrs. Waldegrave was alluding to some physician—in plain terms, a mad-doctor; and though this impression was accompanied by a cold tremor passing rapidly over her entire frame, yet it almost immediately yielded to a feeling of relief and satisfaction as the second thought flashed to her mind that it was merely a test as to her sanity which she had to undergo. The interval of hesitation before she answered, was therefore so short that it scarcely seemed any hesitation at all: and she said in a tone the calmness of which somewhat surprised Mrs. Waldegrave, "Yes, I will see the person to whom you allude; and rest assured that I will not only hear him patiently, but will answer him without passion and without excitement."

"Ah! if you will only listen to him as patiently as you propose," replied Mrs. Waldegrave, "you will be adopting the course most likely to conduce to your own interests."

"Be assured, madam, that I will do so," rejoined Florence. "And now, with your permission, I will retire to my chamber: for I wish to reflect upon all you have been saying."

"Do so, my dear child," was the answer; "and I will write and tell the person to whom I have alluded, that he may be here to-morrow about mid-day."

Florence Eaton then quitted the apartment where this dialogue had taken place; and retiring to her own chamber, she sat down to ponder upon everything she had heard.

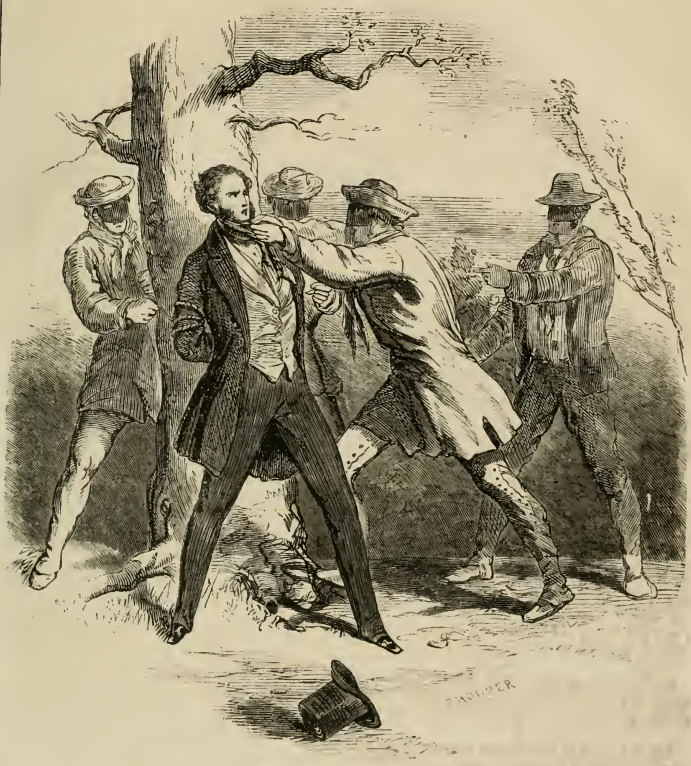
"No," she said to herself after a long and serious meditation, "it is impossible—utterly impossible, that Valentine can be false—equally impossible that by any act on his part he could become unworthy of my love. But, oh! could Mrs. Waldegrave's words have had *another* meaning—a meaning which nevertheless is to lead to the same end? Is it her opinion that the morbid condition of my mind renders *me* unfit to become the bride of Valentine Malvern, and that such an alliance, so far from sealing our happiness, would stamp the misery of us both? Alas! I fear that such was indeed the meaning of her words—a meaning which she however veiled as delicately and as skilfully as she could, but in such a manner that it might dawn in unto my comprehension when duly pondered upon. Yes—she told me at the outset that the course which young ladies mark out for themselves to pursue, is not the one which destiny intends them to adopt; and she spoke to me of the necessity of renouncing all those ideas of happiness which I may have formed in the belief that I was to become Valentine's wife. In telling me that Valentine was false, it was perhaps but a well-meant artifice to prepare me for that *other* revelation: namely, that though he himself is true, yet that it is I who, in consequence of increasing mental infirmity, must no longer dream of the accomplishment of this alliance. And that person who is coming to-morrow, and of whom she spoke so guardedly and even with such mystery,—who can it be, if not a physician—a mad-doctor—to tell me all that it is necessary I should know? Yes, yes—I understand everything now! Poor Mrs. Waldegrave had not the heart to make known to me the extent of my misfortune: she has left it for one who, being of the other sex, possesses a stronger nerve, and who from his avocations is more experienced in the fulfilment of these cruel offices. Alas, alas! are all my hopes of happiness wrecked in this world? But ah! what meant Mrs. Waldegrave by alluding to *another* career already marked out—*another* basis whereon my happiness is to be established? What meant she also by speaking of splendours and brilliancies in connexion therewith? Oh! is it possible that my father—the Prince Regent—intends to take me away from those with whom my life has hitherto been passed, and compel me to mingle in the sunshine gaieties of a Court life? Yes, yes—this must have been her meaning: what other could she have had? But heaven send that my father may rather banish me for ever from his mind—forget that there is such a being as myself in existence—than assert a parental control over me, and compel me to enter upon a new phase of existence which for me must be wretched in proportion to its brilliancy?"

We have given this train of thoughts in the shape best calculated to render it intelligible to our readers: but it was not in the same unbroken continuity nor collected style that the unhappy girl pursued her meditations. Each new idea that entered her brain was fraught with a fresh agony: each successive conjecture that presented itself to her soul, was marked by a renewed paroxysm of excitement. Tears and wringing of hands—convulsive sobs and deep sighs—intervals of blank despair and others of impassioned grief,—by all these evidences of a shattering mind and a breaking heart were the poor girl's thoughts characterized!

At length, after having remained for several hours alone in her chamber, she exclaimed aloud, "Suspense upon *one* point is intolerable! I will know the worst at once."

Then the beautiful creatore—so lovely and so sweetly interesting even in the hour of her bitterest grief and profoundest despondency,—summoned all her fortitude to her aid, marshalled all her energies, and with a mingled courage, dignity, and resignation, retraced her way to the apartment where she had left Mrs. Waldegrave. Advancing with slow but firm step straight up to that lady, she said, "Madam, I have been reflecting upon all that took place between us ere now, and there is one point upon which I must demand—or beseech, if you will—an immediate explanation. You spoke of *another* career that was to open before me, and which is to be associated with circumstances of splendour and brilliancy. A suspicion as to your real meaning has entered my mind——"

"Ah! you suspect something, my dear child?"



exclaimed Mrs. Waldegrave, gazing with a degree of suspense up into the young damsel's countenance.

"Yes—I suspect," responded Florence, speaking slowly and deliberately, "that your words alluded to some design which a very high personage may have formed concerning me."

"Is it possible that you have fathomed my meaning, then?" cried Mrs. Waldegrave, in the most unfeigned astonishment. "I must have been more explicit, therefore, than it struck me I was."

"Explicit enough, madam," answered Florence, "to enable me to comprehend your meaning:"—and the young girl's countenance was pale as marble as she spoke, and her features were rigid, while in her voice there was a depth of tone which made her seem as if she were a statue speaking.

"How singular you look, my dear child!" said Mrs. Waldegrave, not knowing what to think of Miss Eaton's demeanour and conduct. "Are you sure that you have actually understood my meaning?"

"When I mention the name of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent," returned Florence, "is it not sufficient to convince you that I labour under no error as to the significancy of your words?"

"You are right, Florence—you are right!" exclaimed Mrs. Waldegrave. "Tell me at once, then, what think you? what say you?"

"Madam," answered the young lady, in a cold and seemingly passionless voice, "when that person to whom you have alluded, comes to-morrow, I will tell him everything that now occupies my mind—I will explain myself thoroughly to *him!* And now, with your permission, I will keep my chamber until the hour to-morrow when the con-

templated interview is to take place: for I have much need of self-communing."

"Be it as you will, my dear Florence," answered Mrs. Waldegrave: "although I would rather have you with me. But if you prefer being alone, I shall not attempt to thwart you. All your repasts shall be duly taken up to your chamber; and you have but to ring the bell in order to summon the servants for whatsoever you require."

Florence withdrew, and retraced her way to her own apartment: but scarcely had she closed the door behind her, when all the fortitude which had sustained her during this last brief colloquy with Mrs. Waldegrave, suddenly giving way, she burst into tears; and wringing her hands in despair, exclaimed, "It is then as I thought! Yes, not only am I to be for ever separated from him who is dearer to me than life, but to be claimed by a parent whom——O God! that I should be compelled even to harbour the thought——I shrink from acknowledging as such!"

And then poor Florence Eaton gave way to all the anguish produced by these reflections which were so full of a harrowing poignancy. The hours passed—the several meals were served up, but were removed again untasted; and when night came, the unhappy girl, worn out with wretchedness and grief, gladly sought her couch, where through sheer exhaustion she speedily sank into the temporary oblivion of a sound slumber.

CHAPTER CCXIV.

VARIOUS PROCEEDINGS IN DIFFERENT QUARTERS.

It would be impossible to describe the grief and perplexity which prevailed at Hallingham Hall on account of the disappearance of Florence. The servants whom Lord Florimel had sent about in every direction to make inquiries, were active in so doing throughout the rest of that night. They called at the cottages of all the farm-labourers round about, summoning them from their beds to answer the questions put to them: they also inquired at the taverns in the adjacent villages, to ascertain the circumstances under which any vehicle might have happened to stop there at about that time of the night when Florence was carried off: but all these inquiries were fruitless. Throughout the two following days Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine themselves rode about in all directions, renewing those inquiries: and still all was in vain. They were overwhelmed with affliction at the inutility of their search; and as for Pauline—she was well nigh distracted.

The circumstance was involved in a mystery which appeared impenetrable: for it was impossible to fix even the slightest shadow of a suspicion upon any one as the author of the outrage. That Florence had been carried off by some individual who was enamoured of her charms, was the only and indeed the most natural way of accounting for the incident: but at this point conjecture suddenly stopped. A wall of adamant barred its progress: for, as above stated, there was no particular individual to whom suspicion pointed as the perpetrator of the wrong. It has been said in one of the earlier chapters of this narrative that the Florimels mingled but little in society, and received only a select number of guests at any time; and amongst this circle of their friends there was no man who had ever been noticed to cast an improper look upon their cherished niece. Thus the young lady's mysterious disappearance was enveloped in the darkest mystery, and was too well calculated to engender the most serious apprehensions.

For the two days following the abduction Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern, as already said, were unwearied in their inquiries: on the third day, after a serious consultation together, they visited a very active justice of the peace residing in the neighbourhood, to whom they communicated everything that had occurred. This gentleman confessed himself entirely at fault as to the course that should be adopted, after the vain and ineffectual inquiries which had been already made: but he ultimately suggested that Mr. Lawrence Sampson, the celebrated Bow Street Officer, should be at once fetched from London and employed in the investigation. Valentine, who—as the reader will recollect—was well acquainted with the astute thief-taker, caught at the plan, and declared his intention of hurrying at once up to London and bringing Sampson down into Buckinghamshire. He and Lord Florimel returned to Hallingham Hall to order a carriage to be got in readiness; and while it was being prepared, Sir Valentine asked the nobleman whether it were advisable for him, when in London, to call at Carlton House and inform his Royal Highness of the mysterious disappearance of Florence? But Lord Florimel urged Valentine not to delay an instant in bringing Lawrence Sampson back with him to Hallingham,—observing in addition, that it could serve no useful end to acquaint the Prince with the occurrence, as his Royal Highness could not do more than they themselves were a ready performing, and the case was too urgent to admit of even the hour's delay that would be caused by a visit to Carlton House. Valentine coincided with Lord Florimel's view; and entering the carriage, sped away to London. It was late in the afternoon when he reached the metropolis; and proceeding at once to Long Acre, he was fortunate in finding Larry Sampson at home. The officer was just sitting down to a late dinner, after the day's business: but on hearing Sir Valentine's tale, he at once threw down his knife and fork, pushed aside the plate with its untasted contents, and lost not a moment in accompanying the young Baronet. In the middle of the night they reached Hallingham Hall.

After a few hours' rest, Larry Sampson was on the alert. He made Sir Valentine Malvern give him, as minutely as was possible, a description of the man in the labourer's dress who had decoyed him, with the false alarm of Lord Florimel's alleged danger, into the grove. He then asked for the cords with which the Baronet had been bound to the tree: and these were given to him. He likewise obtained an exact description of Florence Eaton, even to the dress which she had on at the time of her disappearance, and which her lover and aunt as well as her principal tiring-maid well remembered. Possessed of these particulars, and taking the cords with him, Mr. Sampson set out alone upon his researches,—declining to be accompanied by any one, as he declared that he

could always manage these matters best by himself.

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The scene now changes to Carlton House in London. It was the evening of that same day on which the dialogues described in the previous chapter took place between Florence Eaton and Mrs. Waldegrave; and at about ten o'clock Mrs. Gale was introduced by the faithful valet Germain into the presence of the Prince Regent.

"Ah! my active agent in pleasant mischief!" exclaimed the Prince, the moment the valet had retired and he was alone with the infamous woman in the apartment where he thus received her; "so you have come to give me good tidings at last? I received your letter two or three days ago, dated from Lechmere Grange in Oxfordshire, stating that the commission was so far fulfilled that the fair one who is to replace my lost Venetia was already caught in the toils which yourself and her ladyship had so cunningly spread to ensnare her. But how does the sweet bird take her captivity?—does she flutter in the cage? and will she fly away from me when I appear in her presence?"

"Prince," answered Mrs. Gale, "I think that when you see this sweet bird, as you call her, you will pronounce her to be a very miracle of beauty. The letter that I had the honour to address to your Royal Highness, was necessarily brief, on account of being so cautiously worded, as I was fearful lest it should fall into other hands: I had therefore no opportunity of expatiating upon the countless charms and attractions of this sweet creature. She is not only transcendingly beautiful, but chaste and pure beyond the possibility of doubt. She belongs to an excellent family, and yet is totally uncontaminated with the fevered atmosphere of fashionable life,—having been brought up in comparative seclusion, and amidst a small and very select circle of friends."

"On my soul, Mrs. Gale, you are quite poetical in your description!" observed the Prince. "Is she as handsome as Venetia?"

"She is not so brilliantly handsome nor so voluptuously splendid as Lady Sackville," replied Mrs. Gale; "but she is endowed with a beauty far more ethereal, more refined, and more exquisite than that of her ladyship. She is a being whom I am convinced, sir, you will love passionately—aye, and love for ever: which," added the infamous woman with a smile, "is saying a great deal for your Royal Highness."

"I am almost afraid you are saying too much, Mrs. Gale," cried the Prince, laughing. "You have indeed piqued my curiosity to an extraordinary degree, and I do already feel over head and ears in love with this sweet creature, before I have seen her! But, Ah!" ejaculated the Prince, as a sudden idea struck him—and a cloud all in a moment fell upon his countenance: "what possible guarantee have I that all this is not a trick? I mean to say, how can I be assured that you and this Lady Lechmere who is leagued with you in the matter, have not tutored some artful girl to play the coy and prudish maiden, when perhaps she is no more entitled to the name of *maiden* at all than the bar-girl in a canteen frequented by a whole regiment of Horse Guards?"

"So confident am I that when your Royal Highness sees this divine creature you will at once fling aside the unworthy suspicion you have just hinted at, that I shall not ask for another guinea in the shape of recompense until after your Royal Highness's victory is achieved."

"Well, this is speaking fair enough, at all events!" exclaimed the Prince. "But now tell me who the young lady is: for if you recollect, you mentioned no name in your letter."

"Of course not, sir: I wrote guardedly, as in duty bound," responded Mrs. Gale. "Neither will I mention any name upon the present occasion, after the suspicion which you entertained."

"But I entertain it no longer," interrupted the Prince. "Perhaps I was even wrong to mention it: but then, of course, I do not wish to have a world of trouble for nothing, and find myself made a tool of after all. Who is she, I repeat?"

"Now, pray bridle your curiosity, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Gale, "and ask not a single question until you have seen the young lady. In fact, Lady Lechmere and I have resolved that you *shall* see her first before you know anything more,—so convinced are we that at a glance your great experience in physiognomy will enable you to recognize the truth of all I am telling you concerning her innocence and purity. As for the beauty of the young lady, on that score there cannot be two opinions."

"Well, have your own way then," said the Prince, who never argued a point long. "But tell me—does she know me?"

"I cannot exactly say whether she knows your Royal Highness by sight, or not: it is most probable that she does, inasmuch as she habitually lives in London with her relatives. But this I *do* know, that she has never been to Court nor attended the Royal Drawing Rooms. And now I am reminded," added Mrs. Gale, "that I have something more to state. Your Royal Highness will recollect that you gave me instructions not to let your name be mentioned in the presence of the young lady, whomsoever she were, that I might select to minister to your pleasure: but I am bound to inform you that Lady Lechmere, in a conversation which she had with our fair captive this morning, spoke the least thing too plainly while preparing her mind for your visit; and it would appear that after two or three hours' solitary deliberation, the young creature's suspicions fell into the right path and led her on to the solution of the enigma."

"Ah! then she knows she is destined for me?" ejaculated the Prince, but without any feeling of annoyance.

"She knows this much," answered Mrs. Gale,—"that your Royal Highness is to pay your respects to her to-morrow in the middle of the day."

"The deuce!" cried the Prince: "the notice is but short. It is true, however, the distance is but short also—some forty-five miles, I believe, or thereabouts—is it not so?"

"It is, sir: and the road is good. I left Lechmere Grange at five this evening—was in London at a little past nine—called at the Palace and learnt that your Royal Highness was entertaining company and could not see me till ten, at which hour I came back——"

"Well, well," cried the Prince, somewhat impa-

tiently: "spare those details, and tell me what said our young lady on learning that she would see me to-morrow. Was she pleased?"

"No: or else how could I expect you to believe in her purity and virtue? I was not present at the time: but Lady Lechmere tells me that she seemed almost stupified as it were—as if she felt that it was her destiny to become your mistress, and yet was filled with consternation at the idea. She said that when she saw you to-morrow she would explain all the thoughts that occupied her mind, and would deal most candidly with you."

"And what does Lady Lechmere argue from this?" inquired the Prince.

"That you will have a very touching and pathetic scene," rejoined Mrs. Gale: "that the fair one, in short, will throw herself upon your mercy—appeal to your best feelings—and all that kind of thing. But that she will surrender without a desperate defence, is not to be for a moment expected."

"Ah! then it will be truly piquant and exciting," exclaimed the Prince. "I really long to see her! But are you sure that the adventure is a safe one, and that there are no cursed risks to run?"

"There are always risks in these matters," replied Mrs. Gale: "but I do not for an instant dread anything like noise or exposure. The young lady's relations will be, I dare say, very glad to effect a compromise agreeable to all parties: the circumstance need not prevent her marrying; and then she and her husband can live in the palace, just as Lord and Lady Sackville used to do."

"I see you have got it all nicely cut and dried for me, Mrs. Gale," said the Prince, rising from his seat. "I do not think that we can now have anything more to talk about. I will run down in a plain travelling-carriage to-morrow in the forenoon, and will be at Lechmere Grange as soon after mid-day as possible."

Mrs Gale then took her departure, and proceeded to her house in Soho Square, where she spent the night; but she was up soon after daybreak in order to speed back to Lechmere Grange and give due notice of the Prince's intended coming."

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Meanwhile Mr. Lawrence Sampson had been pursuing his inquiries not only in Buckinghamshire, but had also pushed them into the adjoining counties of Bedford and Oxford. In the first place he had questioned the keepers at all the turnpikes upon the public roads in that part of the country; and this was a proceeding which it had never struck Florimel nor Sir Valentine Malvern to adopt. The result was that Mr. Sampson learnt that on the particular evening referred to as that of the abduction, and at about ten o'clock, the keeper of a turnpike remembered a carriage and four horses driving up at a tremendous pace; and by the light streaming from his own window he caught a glimpse of the beautiful face of a young lady looking through the glass of the carriage. The man was struck by the expression of the countenance at the time, because he fancied it looked anxious and frightened; and he noticed that it was shaded by a profusion of light hair, falling in long curls from under a sort of gipsy bonnet such as young ladies were accustomed to wear in those times when in the country. Beyond this information the turnpike-keeper could give no details of importance. He did not recollect the colour of the carriage; but he remembered that it had four horses, with two postilions, and a servant seated on the box.

Mr. Sampson was convinced in his own mind that he had thus obtained a clue to the object of his search, and that the countenance which the turnpike-man had noticed was that of Florence Eaton. He accordingly followed up his inquiries along that same road, and managed to trace the carriage-and-four into Oxfordshire: but there he lost scent of it altogether, and therefore came to the conclusion that it had turned out of the main route into some branch-road or bye-lane. But he now prosecuted his researches all about the district into which he had succeeded in tracing the equipage; and visiting each town and village, he endeavoured to find out whether any cord answering a particular description had been recently purchased in that neighbourhood. At length this portion of his inquiry was crowned with success; and he discovered the shop at which the very cord which had bound Malvern's limbs, and which he had brought with him, was procured. The purchaser of that cord was recollected, as to his personal appearance, by the shopkeeper,—to whom however the man's name and all other particulars concerning him, were utterly unknown: but from the description given, Sampson had no doubt the individual was the same person in the labourer's dress who had decoyed Sir Valentine into the grove. At another village, two or three miles distant, Mr. Sampson ascertained that some black crape had been purchased at about the same time as the cord, and by an individual exactly answering the above description: so that the material of which the masks were made that were worn by the three accomplices, had been likewise bought in the same district as the cord, and by the same man, was a fact fully established. Mr. Sampson's researches were therefore now directed towards the discovery of this man; and at length he succeeded in hearing of such a person. Once upon the track, his inquiries were quickly followed up until he obtained positive information that the individual in question was none other than a domestic in the service of a lady of quality whose country-seat was not many miles distant from the villages where the previous links in the chain of evidence had been detected.

The prosecution of this search and the following-up of the various traces which led him on step by step to the final discovery where Florence Eaton was, had occupied several days; and it was between ten and eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the eighth day after the abduction, that Mr. Sampson returned to Hallingham Hall. The results of his proceedings were instantly made known to Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern; and a carriage-and-four was at once got in readiness to bear them all three to the mansion where Florence Eaton was held captive. The distance from Hallingham to that mansion was about sixteen miles; and consequently, with four fleet horses, it could be accomplished in about an hour and a half. Fortunately Lord Florimel was in the commission of the peace for Oxfordshire as well as Buckinghamshire; and

therefore he was enabled to arm himself and companions with an authority to take decisive measures, should any opposition or resistance be experienced at the place whither they were now proceeding for the recovery of Florence.

CHAPTER CCXV.

LECHMERE GRANGE.

At the very time that the carriage-and-four, containing Lord Florimel, Sir Valentine Malvern, and Mr. Lawrence Sampson, was flying along the high road into Oxfordshire, Florence Eaton was seated in her own chamber at the mansion of her captivity, preparing her mind for the supposed interview with the mad-doctor: for that such was the character of the individual whom she was to meet soon after mid-day, she still implicitly believed. Since her second interview with Mrs. Waldegrave on the previous day, she had kept her chamber,—the lady's-maid who was in special attendance upon her, serving her meals. But these, as intimated at the conclusion of a previous chapter, went away untasted; and even on the morning of the day of which we are now writing, Florence had taken nothing but some tea. Thus for four-and-twenty hours naught in the shape of substantial food had passed the poor girl's lips.

It was now verging towards noon, and she was seated in her chamber, endeavouring to arrange in her mind all that she should say to the physician whom she supposed about to visit her. She had resolved to tell him everything—the whole history of her parentage, the morbid feelings which the knowledge of that secret had engendered in her mind, and the sensation of loathing and horror with which she had been gradually led on by those feelings to contemplate the image of her royal father. It was the purpose of the poor girl to make a friend of the physician: for that he would be accessible to such sympathy, she did not doubt—and she even in imagination went so far as to picture to herself a kind-hearted, benevolent, and fatherly old gentleman, who would listen to her with interest and attention and do what he could to serve her.

"I will ask him," thought Florence to herself, "to go at once to my uncle and aunt, to tell them that the Prince purposes to take me away altogether from their guardianship and compel me to plunge into the dizzy whirl of a Court life. I will beseech him to urge those dear relatives to take me home to them again at once, and to save me from my own father! I will tell the worthy physician that if it be really hoped to restore my mind to the equanimity it once enjoyed, this aim can only be accomplished by allowing me to relapse into the calm and tranquil tenour of existence which I until lately led: but that it would unsettle my mind for ever, were I to be surrendered up to the guardianship of that parent whom, alas! I cannot love, and whose image fills me with a horror and a loathing stronger than all my powers of resistance!"

In this manner did the musings of Florence Eaton continue; so that, as the reader will perceive, she looked forward with hope and cheerfulness to the interview which she fancied she was to have with a physician. There was no presentiment of evil at this hour in the young maiden's mind: she indeed felt happier than she had yet done since the night of her abduction; for she confidently anticipated that either this same day or the next would restore her to her uncle and aunt at Hallingham Hall. And did she not likewise think of Valentine? Oh, yes! and she also hoped that she would yet become his bride!

It was a little past noon when she heard the sounds of wheels approaching up the avenue which intersected the park: and looking forth from her chamber-window, which was in the front of the house, she observed a plain travelling-carriage driving up to the principal entrance of the mansion.

"Here is the physician!" she said to herself: but her window was so situated that she could not catch a glimpse of the individual who alighted from the carriage.

Ten minutes now elapsed, during which interval Florence Eaton felt an increasing excitement; and for the first time this day, vague fears and apprehensions relative to the supposed physician's visit began to rise up in her mind. What if he should prove otherwise in character and disposition than she had imagined? what if he were stern, austere, and morose, instead of benevolent and kind? what if he were to refuse to allow her to return to her relatives, or to interest himself any way in her behalf? what, in short, if he had even come to bear her away to London and hand her over to the charge of the Prince? Oh! now indeed were these misgivings crowding in rapidly, and still more rapidly, upon the young maiden's mind: and now also did a presentiment of evil, dark and ominous, overshadow her soul with a deepening gloom, as the storm-clouds gather suddenly upon a sky previously tranquil and serene.

"It appears as if some crisis in my destiny were at hand," thought Florence to herself; and as she caught a glimpse of her countenance in the mirror, when wandering about the room with increasing excitement, she recoiled from the ghastly aspect of her own features: then sinking upon a chair, she pressed her hand upon her bosom to still the strong pulsations of her heart; and as the apprehensions of coming evil gained more and more upon her, she felt that it was only by a strong effort she could prevent herself from bursting forth into a fit of wild hysterical screaming.

Presently she heard a footstep approaching the door. Rising to her feet, she gave utterance to the word "Now!" in an abrupt decisive tone; and all in a moment she found herself cool and collected. The tempest within her had lulled in an instant: but it was a calm unnatural to a degree. She had not however time for further analysis of her thoughts, as the door opened and Mrs. Waldegrave made her appearance.

"How are you to-day, my dear child?" she said with the most amiable look and in the kindest tone.

"I know not how I feel," answered Florence. "But that carriage which is just arrived——"

"It is he whom you are to meet," was the answer given by Mrs. Waldegrave, who anticipated the meaning of the question.

"Then let me go to him at once," Florence immediately replied: "for the sooner the interview takes place, the better."

"Yes—you shall go at once, my dear girl," answered Mrs. Waldegrave: then suddenly catching Florence by the arm, she said, "But you intend to be calm, collected, and reasonable?"

"As I am at this moment," rejoined Florence: and she moved towards the door.

"You do not wish me to accompany you?" asked Mrs. Waldegrave, gazing with some degree of anxiety upon the young lady, whose look and manner she was still at a loss altogether to comprehend.

"No, no," replied Florence, with a sort of feverish petulance. "I must see him alone. Let me go to him by myself. Where is he?"

"In the same room where we conversed together yesterday."

"Then I will proceed thither:"—and Florence sped away towards the apartment thus indicated.

A few moments brought her there. She would not allow herself to pause even for an instant, lest the courage which at present sustained her should all in a moment give way: but she hastened on, with that kind of desperate feeling which impels the individual in cases of suspense to seek to know the best or worst at once.

She entered the room. A person was standing at one of the windows, looking out, and consequently with his back towards her. The door still remained open in her hand, as he turned round: and then—O amazement and horror!—instead of the stranger-countenance of a physician, the well-known face of the Prince Regent was at once revealed to her!

"Florence!—Good God, Florence!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, in a voice of mingled wonder and consternation.

But a wild affright seized upon the maiden; and she bounded away from the apartment. The Prince hurried after her, crying, "Florence! Florence!"

"No, no!" she shrieked forth: and onward she flew as if wings were fastened to her feet.

"Florence—my dear girl—Florence dearest, I beseech you to stop!" exclaimed the Prince, pursuing her as quickly as he could.

She had reached the landing, and glanced back at the foot of the next ascent of stairs to see if he were following her: but the instant she caught a glimpse of his approaching form, she ran wildly up the staircase, still shrieking forth, "No, no!"

"She is mad, poor girl! she is mad!" cried the Prince: and terror lending wings also to his feet, despite the corpulency of his person, he still hastened after her.

Florence had now gained that long passage whence the chambers of the domestics opened on either side; and there she paused to gather breath,—clinging pale and trembling to the bannisters, with mingled anguish and terror distorting every lineament of the countenance that was naturally so sweet, so lovely! But, hark! footsteps are pursuing: hastily do they ascend the stairs—and in another instant she again beholds her father close behind.

"No, no!" she repeats in still more wild and thrilling notes: "you shall not take me away with you!—the image of my mother beckons me to beware!"

Thus speaking, she flew along the passage, and reached the steps leading up into the loft above.

"Perdition!" ejaculated the Prince. "She is mad! she will do herself a mischief!"—and onward he sped in the pursuit.

He also reached the steps in an incredibly short space of time, considering the unwieldiness of his person: but pausing at the bottom to recover breath, he called out, "Florence, Florence! wherefore do you fly away from me? Fear nothing! I will bear you hence—you shall not stay here another moment—you shall go away with me!"

"No, no!" were the thrilling tones of a still wilder anguish, which rang through the loft above, and falling upon the Prince's ear, seemed to penetrate to his very brain.

Up the steps he sped—he entered the loft—and beheld Florence fling a wild affrighted look over her shoulder, as she was precipitating herself onward to the farther extremity of the place.

"Florence, I conjure you!"

"No, no!" was the wildly repeated cry: and as she uttered it, she drew back a bolt which held fast a door at that end of the loft.

"Florence!" exclaimed the Prince, bounding forward to catch her.

But at that instant the door which she had reached was flung open, and the blaze of sunlight burst into the loft. Nothing save the sunny atmosphere seemed to be beyond that threshold: and as the hapless maiden disappeared from the Prince's view, the terrific shriek that thrilled from her lips, pierced like an ice-shaft through his brain.

"O God!" he cried in appalling agony, and fell forward senseless upon the floor of the loft.

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During the few minutes occupied in the scene which we have just been relating, a travelling-carriage and four had entered the park and was dashing up the avenue to the front of the mansion. The windows of the vehicle were down; and a countenance thrust forth, was anxiously surveying the exterior of the building which the equipage was thus approaching. This was Sir Valentine Malvern, who with all a lover's natural excitement, was looking forth in the hope of catching the first glimpse of his well-beloved's face at one of the numerous windows of the immense structure.

"It is a fine old place, this Lechmere Grange," said Mr. Lawrence Sampson, with characteristic coolness: for nothing ever ruffled the equanimity of the Bow Street Officer.

"Yes—a fine old place," answered Lord Florimel, to whom the remark was addressed. "But who would have thought," he immediately added in mingled excitement and indignation, "that a person of Lady Lechmere's rank and position in society, could have been base enough to lend herself to this outrage which is still so unaccountable? For I cannot possibly conceive what motive——"

At this instant a terrific cry burst forth from the lips of Sir Valentine Malvern; and almost simultaneously, another but still more piercing and more agonizing shriek thrilled through the air.

"Just God! 'tis Florence!" exclaimed Lord Florimel, as he beheld from the window of the carriage the same appalling spectacle which had

elicited that burst of mingled horror and despair from Sir Valentine Malvern.

The carriage stopped suddenly: for the postilions, who had likewise beheld the tremendous tragedy, reined in their steeds at the angle of the building nearest to the spot where the occurrence had just taken place.

Alas! the reader cannot fail to have comprehended the nature of this shocking tragedy. The door through which Florence had disappeared from the view of the Prince in the loft, opened—*not* into some adjacent room, as the poor girl in the bewilderment of her feelings had doubtless fancied—but into the very air itself! It was the one to which the old disused crane belonged—the one in short that opened from the end of the building right upon the abyss below! Down she had fallen!—down, down—that sweet angelic girl!—down from the tremendous height, upon a parterre of flowers that lay immediately beneath!

When Lord Florimel, Sir Valentine Malvern, and Mr. Lawrence Sampson, leaping from the carriage, rushed to the spot, they raised the inanimate form in their arms; and though it was not mangled, nor crushed, nor even disfigured, yet life was extinct. The lovely and the innocent was no more: she had fallen through the sunny air, warm and glowing as her own generous heart in life had been, and her death-bed was formed of flowers as sweet and beautiful as herself.

CONCLUSION.

We now take up our pen for the purpose of bringing the present narrative to a close, and recording the necessary farewell words in respect to some of the characters that have figured in our drama, as well as duly chronicling the fate that overtook others. Were we to give in minute details that rapid summary of particulars which we are about to sketch in mere outline, we should be enabled yet to extend our history to many additional chapters: but the doleful tragedy which we have just related,—a tragedy so replete with horror and woe,—has indisposed us for the prolongation of our tale. Besides, the heart sickens at the thought of the guilty career of that Prince whose misdeeds have furnished the groundwork for our past narrative; and we long to escape from the unnatural atmosphere which envelopes his memory.

About the same time that the eventful drama was taking place at Lechmere Grange, Bencull, the Hangman, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker were put upon their trial at the Old Bailey for the murder of Nell Gibson. The Buttoner, who had turned King's evidence, was the principal witness against them. When placed together in the dock, the four prisoners, who had not seen each other since their committal to Newgate,—they having been there kept in separate cells for security's sake,—exchanged grim smiles of recognition. Their hardihood had not forsaken them: desperate as their lives had been, so did they still continue in their conduct during the ordeal that was to lead to death. As for the Hangman—he preserved a degree of brutal indifference and hardened ruffianism which stamped him as a monster in human shape. When the Buttoner made his appearance in the witness-box, Daniel Coffin rattled his chains furiously—shook his clenched fists at the approver—and vomited forth such a torrent of dreadful imprecations and hideous curses against the man, that the whole of the crowded court was shocked and appalled. The Judge was compelled to inform the ferocious prisoner that unless he held his tongue he must be removed forcibly and the trial would proceed without him. Daniel Coffin accordingly desisted: but throughout the Buttoner's evidence, he maintained a succession of savage growls rather resembling those of a wild beast than of a human being. The charge was fully proved against himself and his comrades; and sentence of death was passed upon them in due form. It was therefore unnecessary to prosecute the Hangman farther—and thus no cognizance was taken by the tribunal of the double murder which the dreadful monster had perpetrated at the fence's house in Whitechapel. We must observe, however, that when the Judge had announced their doom to the four prisoners, the Hangman gave vent to another volley of horrible imprecations—not merely levelled against the Buttoner, but likewise against the Judge, the prosecuting counsel, and all who had been in any way mixed up with the judicial proceedings. The frightful strain was taken up by his three comrades; and while thus pouring forth their rage, they were carried back to the gaol. There they were placed in the condemned cells,—each in a separate one; and positive orders were given that Daniel Coffin was to be allowed no opportunity of communication with any one *outside* the prison-walls. It subsequently transpired that this command was issued in consequence of instructions sent direct from the Home Office. Doubtless the Prince Regent thought that the more closely Daniel Coffin's lips were kept sealed, the better. The fellow did, however, give the turnkeys the particulars of all that had ever taken place between himself and the Prince,—especially the trick played in respect to Dysart, and the affair of Westminster Bridge: but either the turnkeys did not believe him—or if they did, were too discreet to mention the circumstances elsewhere. We must add that Coffin wrote a letter to the Prince, begging his Royal Highness to commute the sentence which had been passed, into one of transportation for life: but the epistle, wherein threats and entreaties were strangely jumbled, remained unanswered—perhaps indeed it was never sent at all by the turnkey to whom it was entrusted for the purpose. In short, Daniel Coffin and his three accomplices in crime suffered death on

the scaffold in the Old Bailey,—their ruffian-hardihood enduring to the very last: and thus the man who had so often officiated as the Public Executioner on strangulation-days, was himself sent out of existence on the same stage where he had aided in launching so many miserable wretches into eternity.

The funeral of poor Florence Eaton was conducted in a private and unostentatious manner: her remains were deposited in the village church near Hallingham Hall, Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine Malvern being the chief mourners. The Prince Regent had signified his desire to attend the obsequies; but Lord Florimel, in reply, gave his Royal Highness to understand that if he appeared upon the scene it would be considered little better than an outrage, not only to the feelings of those true mourners who would be present on the occasion, but likewise to the memory of her whose ashes were to be consigned to the dust. When the funeral was over, Lord and Lady Florimel went abroad and remained upon the Continent for many years. They vowed at their departure that they would never return to England again so long as that Prince who had caused their beloved niece's death exercised the sovereign sway. Thus, during the remainder of his regency, and throughout the period of his reign as King of England, Lord and Lady Florimel continued to abide in foreign climes; and it was only when William IV ascended the throne that they returned to England after an absence of fifteen years. The violence of their grief for the loss of the beloved Florence had long been mellowed down into a mournful remembrance of the departed girl: but they never again mingled in the gaieties of life, but devoted the rest of their days to deeds of benevolence and charity. Seldom is it that persons bearing an aristocratic title, succeed in winning the love of the poorer orders; but the names of Lord and Lady Florimel were never mentioned by the suffering and oppressed, save in terms of gratitude and respect. They bestowed not their gold upon the canting hypocrites of Exeter Hall—they afforded no subsidies to the Associations whose objects are to convert the heathen thousands of miles away; but all their sympathies and their aids were exercised amongst the poor, the destitute, and the indigent whose name is Legion in the British Isles.

Sir Valentine Malvern, immediately after the funeral of the perished Florence, had besought the Florimels to permit him to take up his abode at Hallingham Hall: for he declared that the only way in which he could be induced to resign himself to the fate that had thus so cruelly separated him from everything he had loved or could ever love again upon earth, was by dwelling near the spot where the remains of the departed girl were laid; so that he might visit that tomb of hallowed memories—that sepulchre of his own heart's withered hopes and blighted affections! Ere leaving England, therefore, Lord and Lady Florimel gave Sir Valentine the mournful permission which he sought; and he took up his abode at Hallingham. On every Sabbath morning, when the village rustics and maidens were repairing to the church, they beheld Sir Valentine Malvern bending his way on foot slowly thither; and on entering the sacred edifice, as he passed to his pew, would he pause near the simple but elegant monument which marked the resting-place of Florence Eaton—and the tears would trickle down his cheeks. Then, the service being over, he would remain behind the rest of the congregation; and when the church was cleared he would seek the sacred spot again, and kneeling on the cold marble, would pray a long time in silence, while fresh tears trickled down his manly cheeks. The old sextoness, who knew the sad history, never offered to lock the church-door, nor even ventured to show any sign of impatience at being thus kept waiting while Sir Valentine, mourning over his lost one, prayed for strength to support his bereavement. Sometimes in the week-days he would call upon the sextoness, borrow the church-keys, and pass hours alone together within the walls of that humble village temple. Many and many a golden guinea was slipped by Sir Valentine into the hands of the old sextoness; so that his bounty became a handsome annuity to the worthy woman. Years passed, and still Sir Valentine Malvern continued to dwell at Hallingham Hall. His grief became attempered to a manly resignation; and if he were never on the one hand exhilarated into joy, on the other hand his feelings were never warped by misanthropy. Sometimes he received a few select friends at the Hall, and was frequently visited by his half-sisters and their husbands; and on those occasions, while performing all the duties of hospitality in a becoming manner, his deportment, though far from cheerful, was nevertheless by no means calculated to diffuse an unpleasant gloom around him. But he never loved again. The earth possessed not an angel in female shape who had the power to roll the stone from his sepulchral heart;—that heart was the tomb in which the image of the cherished Florence was preserved, embalmed with the holy fragrance of an imperishable fidelity. After Lord and Lady Florimel returned to England, Sir Valentine Malvern still continued to occupy Hallingham Hall. At their death, which happened in 1847—both dying within the same year—that mansion, together with the Buckinghamshire estate, was bequeathed to him; and there he still resides at the present day, the object of love and veneration on the part of all his tenants and the inhabitants of the surrounding district.

We must here observe that when the frightful tragedy happened at Lechmere Grange, it was only through a generous consideration for the piteous entreaties which the Prince prof-

fered to Lord Florimel and Sir Valentine, that they could be induced to refrain from giving the whole affair the utmost publicity. Perhaps they likewise thought that the wretched man was sufficiently punished by the contemplation of the fearful ruin which his wickedness had wrought; and that it were better to leave him to the stings of his own conscience than hold him up to the execration of society. Never was there a more piteous spectacle of a proud and wicked man's utter humiliation, than that which the Prince Regent presented when suing for mercy and forbearance, almost at the very feet of the afflicted uncle and lover of the perished girl. Mr. Lawrence Sampson, who was a witness of the scene, felt an indescribable loathing and disgust for the royal voluptuary who, in his greedy pursuit of licentious pleasures, had been fated to become the cause of his own innocent and lovely daughter's death. But for the reasons above glanced at, it was finally resolved by Florimel and Malvern to allow the veil of secrecy to be thrown as much as possible over the incidents which led to the tragedy; and though a coroner's investigation took place, yet the particulars were never published to the world. Thus, inasmuch as the principal actor in the shocking drama was suffered to go unpunished, it was impossible to hand over the subordinate accomplices in the crime to the hands of justice. But it may be observed as an illustration of the fact that Heaven often deals retributive justice where Man fails to inflict it, that not a single soul who was engaged in the circumstances of that lamentable tragedy prospered long afterwards—while the career of some

was cut short by a violent death. For instance Lady Lechmere (the false Mrs. Waldegrave) when visiting the Grange three or four years after the catastrophe, was so terrified by the belief that the spirit of the departed girl appeared to her in the middle of the night, that she started up from her sleep in the wildest alarm—sprang from her couch—and rushing along the passage in the dark to summon her servants, tripped over a mat, fell with her head in contact against the marble pedestal supporting a statue, and lived but a few minutes to explain to those whom her cries gathered around her, the cause of the catastrophe.

At her death—as there was no direct heir to her property—it was all thrown into the Court of Chancery: the Grange was shut up—and the domestics were discharged. The footman, who in the disguise of a labourer had borne his part in the outrage against Florence Eaton, took to the highway, and two or three years afterwards suffered for his crimes upon the scaffold: while the three men (also servants in Lady Lechmere's household) who had worn the masks on the memorable night of Miss Eaton's abduction, became poachers and were killed in a sanguinary fight with gamekeepers.

From the date of the tragedy at Lechmere Grange, everything seemed to go wrong with Mrs. Gale (the fictitious Mrs. Spencer). A fire completely destroyed all her property at the house of infamy in Soho Square; and as she was not insured, the loss was very serious. She however took another house of the same character, though on a less sumptuous scale: but the death of a foreigner which took place there under very suspicious circumstances, led to her committal to prison on the coroner's warrant. Newgate was crowded at the time—the gaol-fever broke out—and Mrs. Gale was one of the first victims to its rage.

Sally and Dick Melmoth, after the execution of Daniel Coffin, discovered a considerable sum of money concealed in the cellar of the house in Fleet Lane; and this they of course appropriated to their own use. Yielding to all kinds of extravagancies and plunging into the deepest excesses, they were not long in making away with their resources; and in less than a year they sunk down to the lowest pitch of poverty, —at length becoming absorbed in that living mass of demoralization, squalor, and wretchedness, which forms the tremendous refuse of our barbarous system of civilization.

As for Jack the Foundling, he conducted himself tolerably well for a few years in the West Indies: but the influence of old habits gradually returning, he was led to self-appropriate some of his employer's money to minister unto his extravagances, and was summarily dismissed his situation. He then returned to England, where accident revealed to him the secret of his birth: or at all events he was led, by some means or another, to form a pretty shrewd conjecture upon the point. But his claims upon the Princess Sophia being utterly ignored in that quarter, he became to her a source of incessant annoyance, vexation, persecution, and terror, until the day of her death, which happened but a few years ago. He is still knocking about town, living heaven only knows how,—sunk deep into the slough of dissipation and profligacy, but often exciting the wonder and interest of the frequenters of public-house parlours and taprooms by relating the circumstances of his birth,—of which however he has but a dim knowledge, so that the greater proportion of the wonderful things he recites are drawn from the fountains of his own imagination.

The Buttoner, having turned King's evidence against his accomplices in the murder of Neil Gibson, had his life spared; but was sentenced to transportation. It was however found impossible to carry this judgment into effect, on account of the injuries he had received from the Hangman on the occasion of the affray at Mrs. Young's: he was therefore transferred to the hulks, in the infirmary of which he died within a few months after the trial. As for old Mother Franklin, she succumbed to the serious treatment she received on the same occasion; and Mrs. Young, being compelled to have a limb amputated from a similar cause, took to drinking brandy ere the stump was healed, so that inflammation was brought on, and she died miserably.

William Taggarty continued for some years in his shop on Mutton Hill: but at length he removed to a better neighbourhood and a larger establishment, and by gradually falling into a different course of business contrived to amass a fortune without involving himself in the meshes of the law. Instead of buying stolen tea, coffee, pepper, mustard, vinegar, jars of pickles, and so forth,—he took to the safer mode of purchasing inferior qualities in a legitimate way, and then adulterating them with all kinds of abominations. By these means,—and no possible means are surer to attain the desired end,—he rose to the rank of an honest and respectable tradesman: so that at last he became a somewhat important man in his parish—grew great at vestries—filled the office of overseer in a manner hateful to the poor but delightful to the board of guardians—and so completely won the good opinion of the vicar, that through this reverend gentleman's influence he obtained the honourable post of churchwarden. While filling that office, no parishioner was more regular in his devotions nor could put on a more sanctimonious countenance than Mr. William Taggarty. Of course this worthy tradesman lived universally respected —although perhaps he himself might occasionally laugh in his sleeve, when having duly sanded his sugar, sloe-leaved his tea, chicoried his coffee, turmeriked his mustard, vitrioled his vinegar, and bone-dusted his arrow-root, he went to church on a Sunday and helped to swell the chorus of

"Lord have mercy upon us, miserable sinners!"

Dr. Copperas and Dr. Thurston pursued their useful and honourable career to a good old age. These excellent members of the profession were never known to have an angry word with each other: it must however be allowed that this might have arisen less from the Christian feeling which animated them, than from the circumstance that their undisturbed unanimity was marvellously productive of fees. Dr. Copperas died first; and when his will was opened, the following sentence was found in the document:—"I will and bequeath my valuable library of medical works to a gentleman who in private life is adorned with all the qualities calculated to win the esteem and love of those who bask in the sunshine of his friendship, and who as an ornament to his profession stands unrivalled: it is with pleasure that I here record the name of Dr. Thurston." Some three or four years afterwards, when Dr. Thurston himself was summoned to another world, to meet all the patients who had gone thither before him, his last will and testament also contained a passage which we must quote, and which ran as follows:—"In bequeathing my valuable collection of books to that philanthropic institution which I and a certain revered friend of mine (recently dead) had the honour and the happiness of founding, I wish it to be distinctly understood that even if no such name as that of Dr. Thurston had been associated with the establishment of that institution, it would nevertheless have arisen into existence all the same, from the humanity as well as the unparalleled talent of that dear deceased friend Dr. Copperas."

Sir Rolando and Lady Tash managed to live on pretty comfortable terms with each other. They had a large family of children, all of whom were the exact image of the redoubtable officer himself, with the single exception of the eldest son, who bore so striking a resemblance to the Prince Regent that all friends and acquaintances frequently alluded to the circumstance, no doubt with congratulatory intention, as if it were a remarkable honour to have the lineaments of a member of the royal race reflected in the features of a scion of a private family. But whenever the coincidence was mentioned at the dinner-table, Sir Rolando Tash invariably filled a large tumbler to the brim and tossed it down his capacious throat—while Lady Tash was as constantly seized with a sudden fit of sneezing or coughing, which compelled her to apply her handkerchief to her face.

Lilian Halkin remained abroad for three or four years after the catastrophe of Dover Cliffs, handsomely provided for, in a pecuniary sense, by the bounty of her friends in England. At the expiration of that time a sudden longing took her to return to her native land; but while on her way hither, she was seized with a sudden illness at Calais, where she breathed her last. Her remains are interred in the cemetery outside the walls of the town.

Mr. Lawrence Sampson retained his post as Chief Officer at Bow Street, for some years after the period of which our narrative has treated; and when he retired it was to settle down in a neat little villa at Clapton, and enjoy the remainder of his existence in the company of a pretty wife and with the aid of the handsome competence he had acquired during many years of bustle and activity.

The reader will not have forgotten a certain Mrs. Malpas, who had the honour of passing one night with the Prince Regent at Carlton House; and therefore, as this lady has received such special mention in our narrative, it may be as well to state what afterwards became of her. Though she went into mourning for her husband the Colonel, when the news of his death reached her, yet she did not particularly grieve for his loss; and precisely one year afterwards she was persuaded by Alderman Tubbs, corn-chandler and spectacle-maker (the latter denomination alluding to the particular Company to which he belonged) to proceed with him to the altar. Although some thirty years older than herself, with a very red nose and somewhat drunken in his habits as well as snuffy-looking on the front of his shirt,—yet being immensely rich and next in rotation for the honours of the Mayoralty, the lady could not do otherwise than consent to change her name from the aristocratic one of Malpas to the less euphonious one of Tubbs: and as the newspapers some time afterwards declared, "she fulfilled the high and difficult post of Lady Mayoress with a mingled dignity and affability which must long dwell in the memory of the citizens of London." It chanced, too, that during the Mayoralty an address had to be presented to the Prince Regent, on which occasion the honour of knighthood was conferred upon her worthy husband; and thenceforth were they known as Sir Jacob and Lady Tubbs. From all we have ever learnt, she made an excellent wife for the worthy civic functionary: but when, in tender moments of confidence speaking of past events, we believe that she somehow or another always forgot to mention the romantic little adventure which for one night had made her the bedfellow of a Prince.

Mrs. Emmerson and Arabella sank down into the deepest poverty; and when they applied to their friends and acquaintances of better days, they experienced the cruellest rebuffs. For about three years they had a sad battle with the world, earning a precarious livelihood by needle-work, and often experiencing the direst need. Few however who had known them in better times, and who were now acquainted with their distress, pitied them in their latter position; for when living in a mansion and rolling in their carriage at Clapham, they had given themselves such airs and behaved with so much hauteur and arrogance, that their's was the very

pride which according to poetic justice should experience a fall. At the end of the third year of misery, however, they received a visit from Mr. Theodore Varian, who shed tears on contemplating the picture of distress which their abode and their own personal appearance presented to his view. He told them that times had altered with him, and that fortune had so far smiled upon his industry as to enable him to supply a hundred pounds for their immediate wants, and to promise fifty pounds a year for the future. Having thus explained himself, he did not wait to be thanked, but hurried away profoundly affected.

Theodore had become the husband of Mary Owen, and a partner in the great mercantile firm of Chapman and Co. He had settled in London, after having for some time ably conducted the branch-establishment at Geneva; and as riches accumulated around him, and his name grew associated with many noble deeds of benevolence and charity, seldom did it occur to any one who knew him to pause and ask "whether there were not some queer thing formerly attached to his character?" He has proved a good husband and a fond father,—Mary making him an excellent wife, and being quoted by all their friends as a pattern-mother. There are times when Mr. Varian looks back with sorrow and remorse upon the bitterness with which he pursued Emmerson to the scaffold: but the stings of conscience are deprived of nearly all their poignancy when he thinks of the atonement which he endeavoured to make towards the widow and orphan daughter whom Emmerson had left behind.

Lord and Lady Sackville have religiously fulfilled the determination they made on abandoning a Court life, and have ever since devoted themselves to domestic enjoyments. They have never allowed the transactions of the past to intrude upon their minds in such a way as to render them distant and cool to each other; and though that sublime confidence and that exquisite delicacy of feeling which are the elements of pure love, can form no part of the bond linking them together, yet a very sincere friendship exists between them—and it may even be called a love after their own fashion. Besides, Sackville has ever been proud of his splendid wife; and she has all along entertained a similar feeling in respect to her handsome husband: and thus, all things considered, they have lived and still live on happily, comfortably, and sociably enough together. That Lady Sackville has remained faithful to her duty as a wife ever since her retirement from Court, is beyond all suspicion; and that Horace at the same time settled down into habits equally steady, is likewise certain. They have no children; but, on that very account, have exhibited the most devoted attachment to their nephews and nieces, as well as to the offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Varian, who are frequent visitors at the country residence which they purchased and where they habitually reside. We may add that from the day on which she quitted Carlton House, Lady Sackville never again beheld the Prince Regent, and though at first he wrote her several letters, it was always her husband that answered them.

We have just spoken of certain nephews and nieces towards whom Lord and Lady Sackville were much attached: the reader has doubtless already guessed that these were the children that blessed the union of the young Marquis of Leveson with the charming and well-beloved Louisa. Such was the case. Never has the world known a happier pair than our noble-hearted hero and our gentle heroine. From the day of their marriage down to the present time (for they are still alive, with a splendid family grown up around them) not a care has disturbed their felicity—not a cloud has darkened the pathway of their existence. In them virtue has been well rewarded; and in the conduct of their sons and daughters, do they behold the bright reflection of their own example.

We said that not a single care has intervened to mar their happiness: we should however qualify the assertion by stating that there was *one* incident of sorrow which occurred a few years after their marriage—and this was the death of the excellent Miss Stanley. But that worthy aunt departed not this life ere she had fondled three or four of her niece's children in her arms; and as her earthly career had been characterized by every virtue, so was her death-bed attended by every consolatory and tranquillizing influence.

Sir Douglas and Lady Huntingdon have likewise been supremely happy in the marriage state; and when in the first years of their union the Baronet beheld his beautiful wife radiant with smiles, and when he dandled upon his knees the two blooming boys with which she presented him, he could not help looking back in surprise and amazement upon the earlier portion of his life, wondering that he had ever been able to find satisfaction or pleasure in the paths of dissipation. He often laughed too when worthy Mrs. Baines, who retained the place of housekeeper until the day of her death, reminded him with a jocular air that "after all said and done, it was she herself who had first given him the hint that Ariadne would make him a most excellent wife." And the good woman's prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter.

We have now brought our narrative to a conclusion. Some of our readers, perhaps, might wish us to enter fully into all the persecutions and sufferings which the Princess of Wales continued to endure, until the day of her death, at the hands of her inhuman and remorseless husband: but those are matters which can be perused in any impartial history, to which sources must we refer the inquirer for farther information upon the subject. We have now done with the vile and profligate career of that

injured Princess's husband, and do not purpose to follow him in his misdeeds and debaucheries when he occupied the throne by the title of George IV. But inasmuch as there are incidents of the succeeding reigns which seem to furnish ample food for our pen, and to promise a renewed interest for the reader who is inclined to follow us through such investigation, we conclude our present narrative by inviting attention to a *Third Series* of the "MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON."

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